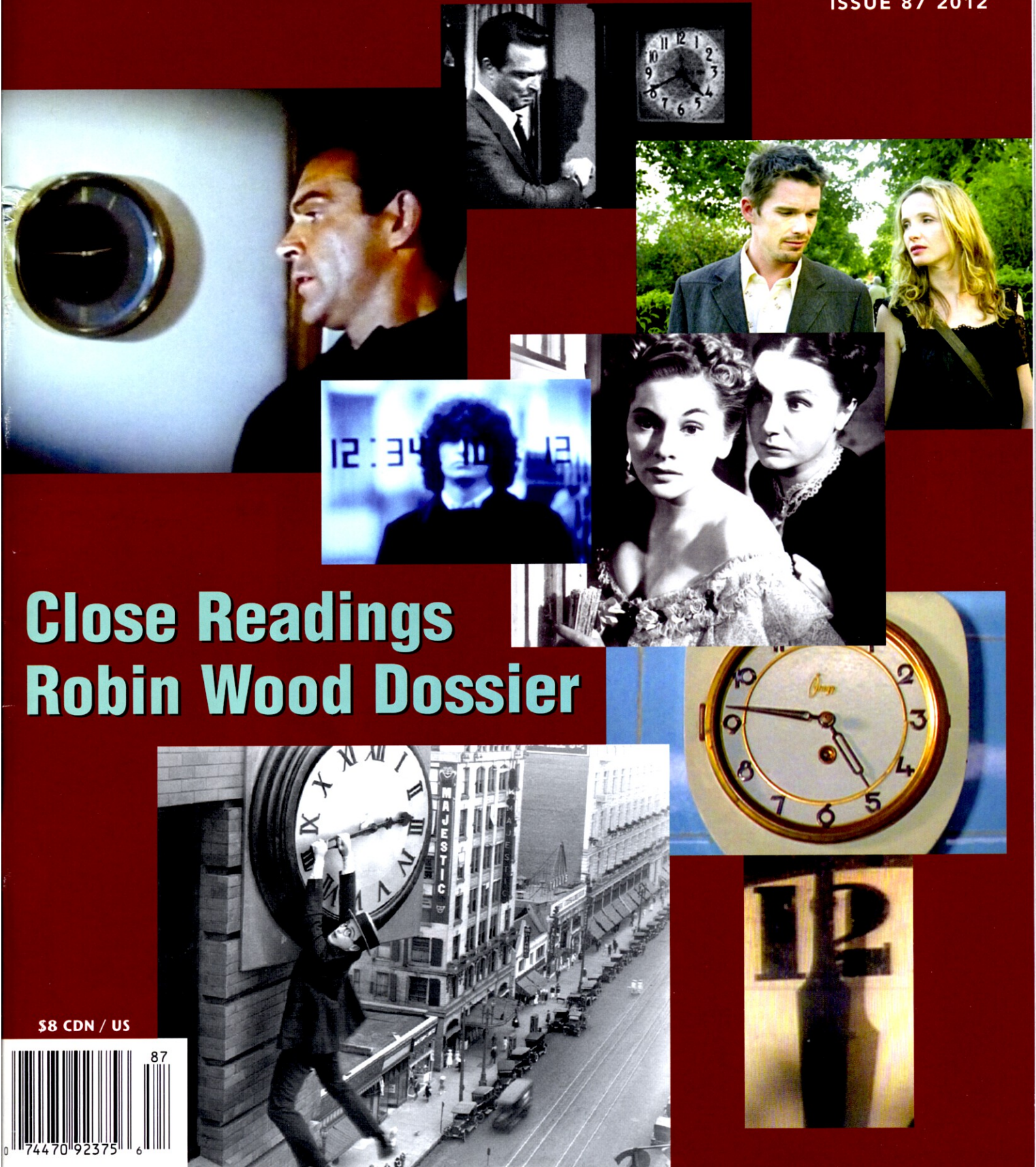


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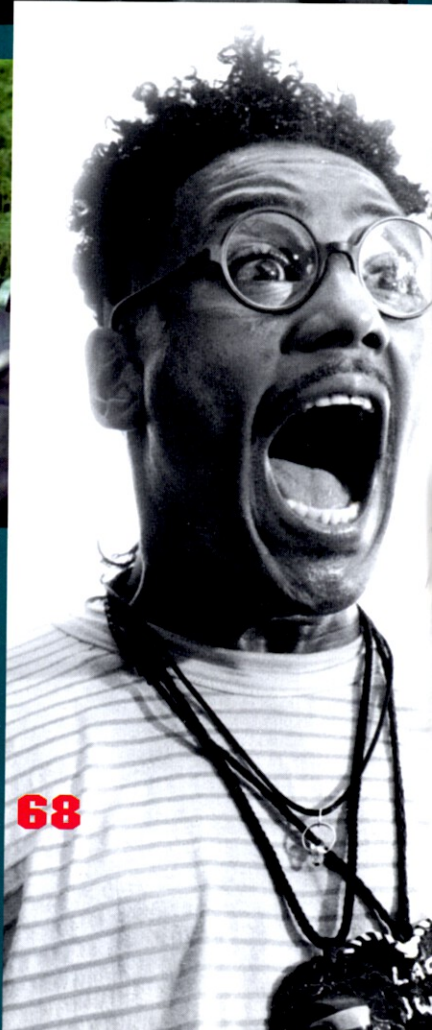
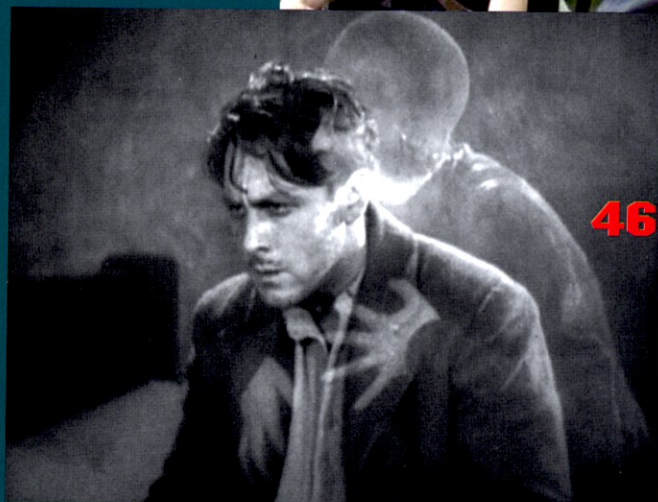
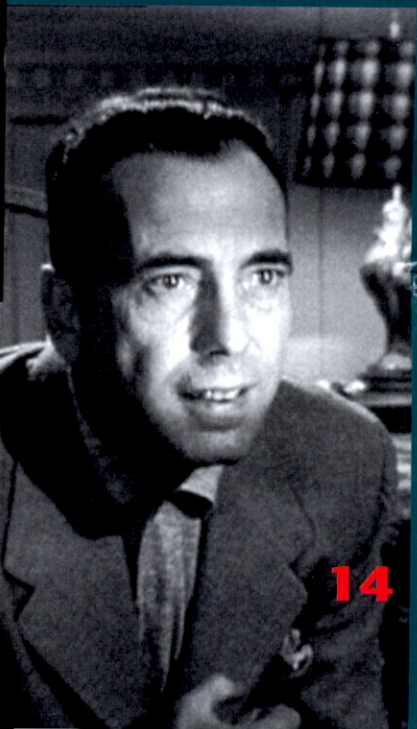
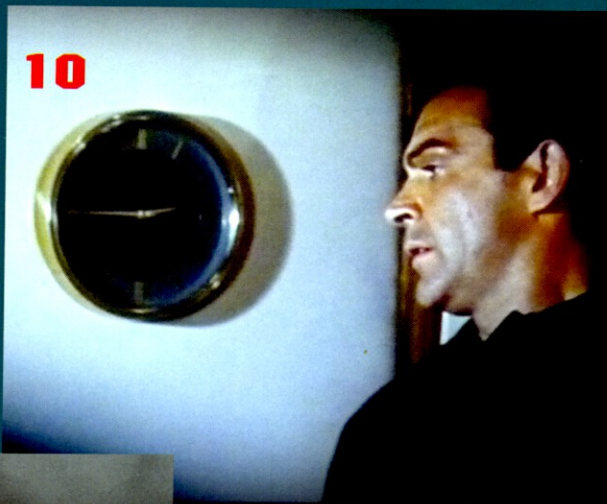
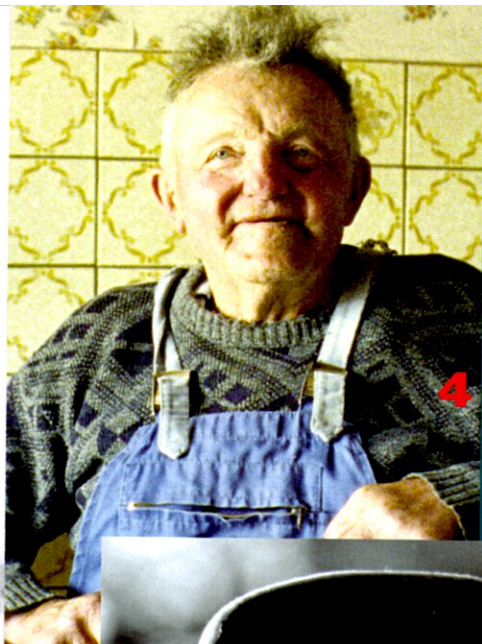
ISSUE 87 2012



Close Readings Robin Wood Dossier

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CLOSE READINGS

- | | | |
|--|----|---|
| Florence Jacobowitz
and Richard Lippe | 3 | Editorial |
| | | Lumière, Astruc, Bazin |
| Jerry White | 4 | RAYMOND DEPARDON'S <i>PROFILS PAYSANS</i> |
| Jacob Potempski | 10 | <i>The Clock</i> |
| Tony Williams | 14 | The Imagery of Surveillance
<i>IN A LONELY PLACE</i> |
| Robert Alpert | 21 | <i>Marriage In a Lonely Place</i> |
| George Porcari | 25 | Nobody's Vision
JIM JARMUSCH'S <i>DEAD MAN</i> |
| Daniella Gitlin | 28 | To Experience <i>Song of Ceylon</i> |
| M.G. Moscato | 34 | Terrence Malick's <i>The Tree of Life</i> |
| Mark Player | 36 | Rogue Vehicles
DAVID CRONENBERG'S <i>FAST COMPANY</i>
AND THE TAX SHELTER PERIOD |
| Alsegul Koc | 40 | Emotional Fault Lines in <i>Café de Flore</i> |
| Florence Jacobowitz
and Richard Lippe | 42 | In Memoriam
EVE ARNOLD
ELIZABETH TAYLOR |

ROBIN WOOD DOSSIER

- | | | |
|-------------------|----|--|
| Alexander Jacoby | 46 | Personal and Political Views
HOW ROBIN WOOD TAUGHT US HOW TO LIVE |
| Adam Balivet | 54 | Sweeter Still
<i>SWEET MOVIE</i> REVISITED |
| Adam Bingham | 58 | Magic in the Attempt
<i>BEFORE SUNSET</i> AND A LEGACY OF CRITICISM |
| Michael Longfield | 62 | Love Me Three Times
TIME AND NARRATIVE IN
<i>LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN</i> |
| | | The Formal Dualism of
Spike Lee's <i>Do the Right Thing</i> |

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

CINEACTION ISSUE 88 Submission Deadline: April 15, 2012.

BEYOND THE NARRATIVE: SOCIAL ISSUES ON FILM

Recently, the theme of 'Social Issues', once relegated to the documentary, appears to be of increasing interest to fiction filmmakers; a little meaningful 'content' mixed in with the entertaining story. For the purpose of CineAction #88, we are interpreting 'Social Issues' in its broadest sense to include anything and everything to do with the state of society and social life, whether motivated by political, economic, or indeed social forces. While some directors like John Sayles and the Dardenne brothers have always focused on narratives that deal with these concerns, there seems to be a growing number of filmmakers who are tackling and/or taking on the 'bigger issues'. Examples include big budget/big star films (*Traffic*, *Syriana*, *Blood Diamond*), low budget indies (*Martha Marcy May Marlene*, *Margin Call*), and Canadian (Philippe Falardeau's *Monsieur Lazhar* and Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies*) and European 'art films' (Kassovitz's *La Haine*, Kaurismäki's *Le Havre*, Olmi's *The Cardboard Village*). We welcome any approach to this broad theme: investigations and/or analyses of specific films, directors, topics, approaches, or theories.

BROMANCE FILMS

While this could be seen as a sub-genre of Social Issue films, it is possible to look at the genesis of this new genre in terms that extend beyond the social. A seeming extension and updating of the 'buddy film' genre, there appears to be more of interest and at stake here. It is noteworthy that in general, Bromance films are comedies, even and especially when the subject matter involves terminal cancer, as in the recent *50/50*.

Papers should be submitted in hard copy, mailed directly to Susan Morrison, the editor of this issue. Once accepted for publication, the paper will then be emailed as a file attachment. Please submit a brief proposal as early as possible as an indication of intention to submit.

A style guide is available on our website www.cineaction.ca

Please address all queries and submissions to the issue's editor:

Susan Morrison, 314 Spadina Road, Toronto ON, Canada M5R 2V6
smorr@cineaction.ca

CINEACTION ISSUE 89 Submission Deadline: Sept. 15, 2012

3D, IMAX, CGI AND BEYOND...

Waves of technological investments and innovations continue to transform cinema, on both miniature and 7-story screens. From novelty to ubiquity, 3D, IMAX and CGI, and the digitalization of all the arts and media, are everywhere in, and at, the movies. Just as relentlessly, cinema's place in vast global conglomerates or in the proliferating cross-platforms of new media, changes what we all, as critics and spectators, see, experience and enjoy. Open to a wide range of submissions: critical and historical discussion of transformations in cinema, analysis of representative films or directors, from Cameron to Herzog, changes in aesthetics and business.

CANADIAN FILMS AND TELEVISION

Historical and critical analysis of Canadian films and television. Reviews of recent films particularly welcome.

Papers submitted in hard copy to Scott Forsyth, Department of Film, Centre for Film and Theatre, York University, 4700 Keele St. Toronto ON, Canada M3J 1P3. If accepted, a file of the paper will be requested. Queries to sforsyth@yorku.ca. Style guide is available at www.cineaction.ca.

EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE

Scott Forsyth, Florence Jacobowitz,
Richard Lippe, Susan Morrison

Design—Bob Wilcox Website—Mike Cartmell

MAILING ADDRESS: 40 Alexander St., # 705, Toronto, ON, Canada, M4Y 1B5
Telephone 416-964-3534

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STILLS: TIFF Library, Richard Lippe

FRONT COVER: *The Clock* **BACK COVER:** On the set of Billy Wilder's *Some Like it Hot*

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CONTRIBUTORS

Robert Alpert received his MFA in Film from Columbia University, occasionally teaches college classes on film, and has written for *Jump Cut* and *Senses of Cinema*. He practices in the area of intellectual property law.

Adam Balivet studied film at Emerson College, and has contributed previously to *Cashiers du Cinéma*. He is currently living in Boston, and continuing to exhibit his film, *To Hell With It*, as an interactive installation—in art spaces, cafés, pubs, and any other agreeable venues.

Adam Bingham teaches Film Studies at Edge Hill University in England, and is a regular contributor to *Cineaste*, *Asian Cinema* and *Senses of Cinema* as well as the editor of *Intellect's Directory of World Cinema: East Europe* book.

Daniella Gitlin currently teaches expository writing to first-year undergraduates at Columbia University in New York City, where she will graduate from the MFA program in Nonfiction Writing this fall. Her short film, *On the Futility of Escaping from the Self*, was screened at the 2009 Queens International Film Festival.

Florence Jacobowitz teaches in the departments of Humanities and Communications at York University.

Alexander Jacoby lectures on Japanese and world film at Oxford Brookes University. He is the author of "A Critical Handbook of Japanese Film Directors" (2008, Stone Bridge Press), and is currently working on a monograph on Hirokazu Koreeda.

Robert Lightning is a freelance critic and regular contributor to *CineAction*. He is currently completing a book on the film *Brokeback Mountain*.

Richard Lippe teaches film study at York University, Toronto. He is currently putting together a book of Robin Wood's writings.

Michael Longfield is a writer living in Toronto, and is thankful Robin Wood encouraged him to submit this article for publication.

M. G. Moscato has worked in publishing for several years as a book editor. With an M.A. from the University of Arkansas, he currently teaches writing and communication.

George Porcari is a native of Lima, Peru and has lived and worked as a teacher and a librarian in New York and Los Angeles. His photo and film work can be seen in lightmonkey.net.

Jacob Potemski is a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies department at Trent University. Jacob completed his Master's in Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam. His Master's thesis dealt with the problem of time in modern philosophy. In his PhD, he is exploring questions of time in relation to the cinema.

Jerry White is Canada Research Chair in European Studies at Dalhousie University. His most recent book is "Revisioning Europe: The Films of John Berger and Alain Tanner" (University of Calgary Press, 2011).

Tony Williams is Professor and Area Head of Film Studies in the Department of English, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. He is currently co-editing an anthology on Hong Kong Neo-Noir with Esther Yau.

CLOSE READINGS

We chose the theme of close critical readings for issue 87 as we support the value of the practice and hoped to confirm its validity in the present day.

The practice of close readings demands an engagement with the film that is neither dominated by theory and scholarship nor as casual and impressionistic as a blog might be. Close critical readings are not without a theoretical premise; the film, however, is used to test theoretical precepts against a reading that is grounded in the work itself. Critical readings evidence both a rigour and creative impulse. They presuppose that some films invite a complex response and the practice of criticism opens up a discussion that extends the experience of viewing the film. There are directors who insist upon this kind of engagement and some films invite repeated viewings; others are geared to be taken less seriously and are intentionally undemanding.

The diverse responses we received encourage us to believe that critical readings are still relevant. Our call for papers produced responses that covered a wide range of film and approaches that expressed a strong personal engagement with the film and filmmakers chosen for discussion.

The second section of the issue features articles that were received initially in response to issue 84, our tribute to Robin Wood. Given Robin's commitment to close readings, our chosen theme is part of his legacy.

—Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe, editors



Lumière, Astruc, Bazin

RAYMOND DEPARDON'S *PROFILS PAYSANS*

"I was born near Lyon, so the influence of the Lumières is felt."
—Raymond Depardon, in interview with Jay Kuehner (35)¹

By JERRY WHITE

Even though his reputation in France is primarily built on his fondness for taking photographs of both celebrity culture and combat zones that lend themselves to splashy newspaper headlines, the cinema of Raymond Depardon is based in a tripartite approach to the language of cinema. He is influenced in equal part by Alexandre Astruc's notion of the "caméra-stylo," Andre Bazin's faith in cinema's realist vocation, and the Lumière brothers' faith in the ability of a well-constructed shot to illuminate the world.² What I want to argue here is that it is this three-part formal inheritance that supports Depardon's critique of capitalist modernity's relentless pursuit of efficacy. The critique is not mounted by didactically marshalling material along the lines of most documentary (of both the radical-political sort and the more benignly educational or informational). Depardon's films thus demand a strategy of "close reading" in a way that is exceptional among documentaries, and especially documentaries made by filmmakers with a background in journalism. This critique of modernity, implicit throughout his career both at the level of form and content, is most clearly visible in his "Profils paysans" trilogy (2001–2008). These are his most autobiographical films, shot in the French alpine countryside of his childhood. They are also the most painterly works he has done in cinema. The complex visual structures of the "Profils paysans" films let us see Depardon as a filmmaker whose critique of the brutalising qualities of both efficacy and efficiency is of a piece with his rejection of a continuity-led approach to film grammar in favour of this highly unorthodox combination of Astruc, Bazin, and the Lumières.

This is not to say that Depardon rejects montage out of hand; what he (like Bazin) rejects is an approach to editing that forces visual and philosophical nuances into an artificial mould of the clear and linear. His film form is based not on the use of montage within a scene or decoupage, but on a sort of macro-level approach to montage, one that puts complexly composed images (oftentimes sequence-shots) into play with one another. This formal sensibility has an ethical component as well. In the "Profils paysans" films, the gradual slipping away of a resilient but embattled peasant way of life has an echo in the flashes of continuity editing in a cinematic vocabulary that is otherwise entirely opposed to such norms. Depardon is telling stories in all of these films, but he is doing so in a way that relies on an associative rather than a linear sensibility.

That Depardon's cinema would be so close to a deeply visual sense of the narrative is no surprise, for he is definitely better known as a photographer than as a filmmaker. He co-founded the Gamma photo agency in 1966, and recalled in *Depardon/Cinéma* (a catalogue raisonné that accompanied a 1993 touring retrospective of his work as a filmmaker) that "When Gamma was founded in 66, with Gilles Caron and the

others, I proposed that we create a film department. This frustrated desire to make films stuck with me. We bought an Eclair and we tried to match the press photos with TV documentaries."³ In France his name is synonymous with the image of the exciting life of the photojournalist, but cinema has been present in his career since the very beginning. His filmmaking has always been defined by a rigorous visual aesthetic whose qualities include stationary cameras, identically repeated setups, and lack of cutting within a scene. This eschewal of editing has been especially important to Depardon; in the anthology *Depardon/Cinéma* he recalled how as a young photographer, his boss Claude Otzenburger had shown him films by American cinéma vérité filmmakers like D.A. Pennebaker and the Maysles brothers, and had then rented him a camera and given him the following imperative: "you'll go do some sequence-shots in public places, even without sound. But you won't cut. I don't



Profils paysans : la vie moderne

want you to cut." A little later in the same essay, Depardon recalls that:

I got my start in 1963 with a little company called World TV Press, with Claude Otzenburger and Claude Barrett, which did stories for TV. I remember having done an interview on de Gaulle's policies and it couldn't have any cuts: Otzenburger asked people in the street what they thought of General de Gaulle and people left, discussed, spoke, and I didn't cut at all. It was *caméra stylo*.⁵

Depardon is alluding here to Alexandre Astruc's well-known concept of "*la caméra stylo*," or the camera as pen. Writing in a 1948 issue of the popular movie magazine *L'Écran français*, Astruc marvelled at the rise of 16mm technology and its potential to allow filmmakers as much freedom as the novelist or the essayist. At one point, he speculated that "a Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16mm camera and some film, and would be writing his philosophy on film."⁶ Clarifying that he meant all this "in a very precise sense," he wrote that "I mean that the cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language."⁷ Depardon is describing a very similar escape from "the tyranny of the visual," by which I think Astruc means the demands of conventionally "clear" or composed imagery or editing patterns. In this case

what Depardon is escaping is the tyranny of conventional montage, moving away from the immediate and concrete demands of documentary storytelling and trying to be as flexible and subtle as a writer trying to use oral testimony by way of presenting the current reality. This escape from immediate and concrete demands became the characterising quality of his formal and thematic tendencies alike.

The connection to Bazin can be seen in Depardon's vérité-esque interest in small details—physical gestures, styles of dress, manners of speaking, all of which are emphasised by framing and repetition—and the way that such details illuminate the world of which they are a part. Bazin writes in his essay "An Aesthetic of Reality" about how in Roberto Rossellini's film *Paisà* "The unit of cinematic narrative... is not the 'shot,' an abstract view of a reality which is being analyzed, but the 'fact.' A fragment of concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity, whose meaning emerges only after the fact, thanks to other imposed facts between which the mind establishes certain relationships."⁸ The establishment of these kinds of open-ended, ambiguous relationships between "facts" or small fragments of detail, which connect to each other in complex ways. Depardon, in an interview with Phillipe Séclier that is part of his book *1968*, recalled what he liked about photographing Charles de Gaulle: "General de Gaulle was incredibly photogenic. His dress, his cars, his bodyguards, all participated in this aestheticism that obviously fascinated every photographer."⁹ This interest in fragments of reality—bodyguards, cars, suits—and an ability to subtly frame them in a way that tries to understand how they form complex systems is equally key for the Lumière's





Profils paysans : le quotidien

most lasting work, and this is what makes both the brothers' and Depardon's filmmaking consistent with Astruc's belief that "All thought, like all feeling, is a relationship between one human being and another human being or certain objects which form part of his universe. It is by clarifying these relationships, by making a tangible allusion, that the cinema can really make itself the vehicle of thought."¹⁰ The "Profils paysans" series show us that Depardon has been thinking cinematically about the emergence of a world defined by a cold will to control, and, in following Astruc, has been doing that by clarifying the relationships between human beings and the objects that form their universe, a universe which is quickly and painfully fading away.

This "Profils paysans" series represents his coming full circle, from the margins (his first films were shot in places like Israel, Prague, and Chad) to the metropolis (he made many films in the 1970s–90s in Paris) and now back to the margins (of France's Haute Loire).¹¹ There are ostensibly three "Profils," although the series could be said to begin with the autobiographical film that Depardon made with Roger Ikhlief in 1984, *Les années déclin*, which is made up of photos and unedited film footage that he shot as a young man (including black and white footage of Toubou nomads), and a close-up of his face against a black background, narrating his life.¹² Depardon's peasant background is front and centre in *Les années déclin*, his sentimental investment in the French countryside quite explicit. But that investment becomes less autobiographical, and more clearly political, in the three films that he made between 2001 and 2008: *Profils paysans : l'approche* (2001), *Profils paysans : le quotidien* (2005) and *Profils paysans : la vie moderne* (2008). It is in these films that Depardon intersects strongly with the thought of John Berger, specifically his work on peasant life. In addition to being a renowned art critic, Berger is also a Booker-winning novelist (for his 1972 novel *G*). His "Into their Labours" trilogy—comprised of *Pig Earth* (1979), *Once in Europa* (1987) and *Lilac and Flag* (1990)—is similar to the "Profils paysans" films in many ways. Both Berger and Depardon share a melancholy about the passing of peasant life, about the death of a mode of existence that is inherently difficult, impoverished, and isolated. *Pig Earth* concludes with what Berger calls a "Historical Afterword." It is there that Berger classifies peasantry as a "culture of survival," but laments that "For the first time ever it is possible that this class of survivors may not survive. Within a century, there may be no more peasants. In Western Europe, if the plans work out as the economic planners have foreseen, here will be no more peasants within twenty-five years."¹³ Depardon's "Profils paysans" series, which begins 22 years and ends 29 years after Berger wrote that, offers a glimpse of what this post-peasantry might look like.

The "Profils paysans" films are largely made up of fixed-position sequence-shots, although there are some important visual differences. Early in the series' first film, *Profils paysans : l'approche* (2001), there is a stunning image where Marcelle Brès (an aged, windowed farmer) and her neighbour Raymond tend to pigs; the camera is set well back from them, and is right in the centre of the feed area. There are long troughs on both sides and a small window just at the end where only white light is visible. The two old timers walk back and forth, chatting between themselves, in a take that lasts about two minutes. This shot is as patient as anything in Depardon's cinema, but it has a kind of visual richness that is at odds with the spare, simple compositions that define so much photojournalism (includ-

ing his own). This is also true of the interviews that directly follow this, with Louis Brès and Raymond and Marcel Privat, all retired farmers. Depardon shoots both of these interviews, as he does all of the interviews in this series, at a kitchen table with the camera facing the subject directly. But in the Brès and Privat sequences, a green cloth runs along the very top of the composition, giving it the illusion of a frame. The interview with Brès and his young neighbour Monique Rivière is equally complex; the camera is again facing the subjects directly, but the frame is sharply divided between left and right, using both colour and darkness, in the foreground, mid-ground, and background. It is a dense, symmetrical image.

These compositions are as rigorous and unyielding as the sequence-shots of his earlier work, such as his landmark films in Chad or Paris. He made three films in that African country, two of which were devoted to the kidnapping of the French anthropologist Françoise Claustre (the first is known as *Tchad: L'embuscade* and is from 1970; the other two, devoted to Claustre, are known simply as *Tchad 2* and *Tchad 3*, and are from 1975 and 76, respectively). Depardon's interviews with Claustre are not quite uncut, but they are close to it; the only editing is jump-cuts. The angle throughout both films is almost identical; the camera is set low to the ground, seeming to be seated next to Claustre, and she is framed in, more or less, a medium shot. There is no camera movement. These are simply images of Claustre talking about her captivity and the conditions under which she lives. Although these are synch-sound films, the influence of the Lumières is clearly felt, to invoke Depardon's statement to Jay Kuehner; the film follows a grammar completely based on single shots rather than any kind of découpage or cutting within a setup. But there is a visual complexity in the comparably unblinking interviews in *Profils paysans : l'approche*, a sort of visual generosity, that marks this later work as very different from Depardon's earlier films. Having left the metropolitan and globe-trotting photojournalism behind, Depardon is now *home*, and thus presents the world of the Haute Loire as intricate, deep, and made up of compound elements. This interest in multiplicity defines his compositional sensibility in this film. His approach to editing has remained more or less the same, but he is definitely choosing a different kind of brush-stroke for these interviews than the ones he used to evoke Françoise Claustre or, in his similarly Lumière-esque 1994 film *Délits flagrants* (about accused criminals in Paris), those facing France's brutally bureaucratic justice system.¹⁴ Those two films have a very clear relationship between subject matter and form. They are both about the pain of a desperately impoverished existence; Claustre was held by the rebels for over three years, while *Délits flagrants* is made up of a parade of increasingly desperate people accused of petty crimes. And they are both thus possessed of a compositional style and editing pattern that is defined by a kind of relentlessness. Depardon is evoking a more complex political and ethical situation in *Profils paysans : l'approche*, although we can still see an important theme of individuals being trapped in systems which have no regard for their well-being or distinct situation. Thus we see, in the later film, a kind of editing and mise-en-scène which recalls this grimmer, more brutalising work but which also leaves space for a viewer to feel the warmth and the profundity of the place that is being lost.

The visual schema of the second film in the series, *Profils paysans : le quotidien* (2005) is slightly different than that of its predecessor *Profils paysans : l'approche*, and its political analy-

sis evolves along with this formal shift. Depardon acknowledged this in his conversation with Jay Kuehner, telling him that "In *Profils paysans*, in making the first and second chapters, there were years and other films in between, and I didn't shoot the two parts in the same way. I spoke with the farmers in the second chapter. So it's evolving. I'm not certain how the third chapter will turn out."¹⁵ I would argue that these formal differences (including those that would indeed emerge in the third part) are inseparable from Depardon's larger analysis of the dissolution of the peasant world. The opening images are of Louis Brès's funeral, and although the pace of editing is relatively crisp, the camera does not move at all. This is followed, however, by a series of hand-held long takes of Marcel Privat, wandering through the hills. This sequence is capped by a very long take where Depardon (off screen) discusses with Privat the daily life of the village and tries to squeeze out his feelings about the death of his neighbour; Privat is in close-up, and now the camera does not move at all. A bit later in the film there is a similar sequence with Marcelle Brès, which mixes still and hand-held camera work and has a fairly crisp pace of editing, but eschews any kind of cutting within a setup and which is capped by a very long take where the camera barely moves at all (there is a slight handheld pan left to follow Brès as she walks away), and Depardon's voice-over tells us that shortly after these images were taken, she fell and had to be hospitalised. The first film, then, is a studied, rigorously composed exposition of a community still clinging to very old rhythms of work and community, and its visual style reflects this: it is made up solely of long takes from fixed camera positions. The clear, focussed illusionism of continuity-oriented patterns of editing and composition are absent here; the visuals of *Le quotidien* are suggestive of nothing more than a pre-1900 film grammar, an artisanal as opposed to industrial visual style.

In the second film, though, the life of these villages is clearly shifting, and so is Depardon's aesthetic. We still have long takes, but from time to time they slip into montage. The formal shifts are infrequent enough to make them seem reluctant, part of the same sort of gradual and haphazard shifts that are defining rural life. A particularly expressive example of this comes in the interview with Amadine Gagnaire and Robert Maneval. This is in the kitchen-tableau style of the previous film, but features a cutaway to a close-up of Gagnaire, as Depardon's voice-over tells us that she comes from a suburb of Lyon, from a family with no agricultural background, and that she and her partner are struggling to buy a small plot while she finishes her schooling. Depardon also cuts to a very oddly composed image of Maneval's wife Paulette; the camera is to the side of her, making the line of the kitchen table a diagonal that goes about halfway up the frame; the camera is also just a bit to the side, not a quite at a Dutch angle but slightly off nevertheless. When Depardon cuts back to the head-on shot of the table, that's on a slight diagonal now too. Depardon returns to his favoured compositions, but there are variations here. Matters are shifting, and awkwardly. Gagnaire can't quite find her place, and Depardon doesn't quite find his visual groove.

Matters shift further in the third and final chapter of the series, *Profils paysans : la vie moderne*. Like the other films it begins with a long take shot out a car's windshield as it drives down a narrow dirt road; Depardon, on the voice over, talks about how they are returning to the Privat farm. The farm and its community, though, have changed: not beyond recognition, but significantly. That's true of Depardon's cinematic form too.

Early in the film we meet Alain Privat, nephew of Marcel (he looks to be in his late 40s). The first time we see him he is awkwardly posing before the camera with his new wife, Cécile. This is a long shot, with the rolling hills in the background; the newlyweds ask Depardon, who is off-screen, if they should pose or just act naturally, and we hear Depardon reassure them that they'll take several poses. On the voice over Depardon explains how they met through an ad in the newspaper and now live together in a wing of the farm. It is a moment that is both self-reflexive (the newlyweds directly addressing the camera, wondering about the pose they should strike) and quite consistent with the demands of clear, linear narrative, as Depardon's voiceover fills in the gaps of the story of the farm since last we left it in *Profils paysans : le quotidien*. Furthermore, the kitchen table interviews are present again, but in a further diversified form. The first of these is with Cécile, and while it is, like the other interviews in Depardon's cinema, a plan-séquence or sequence-shot, the camera is set closer than in the other tabletop interviews. The interview with the Privat brothers is shot further back and slightly to the side, with the brothers on opposite sides and the table forming a diagonal line that, as in the Paulette Maneval interview, goes about halfway up the frame. These interviews are interesting to compare visually because their subjects are talking about some of the same issues. Cécile talks about how the Privat uncles don't really accept her because she is an outsider, and because they are unhappy that their nephew has met someone while they have lived their lives as bachelors. The uncles, for their part, express scepticism about Cécile, shrugging when Depardon asks if they get along with her, saying that they don't like being pushed around and that she doesn't think much of older ways of doing things. The visual and cultural unity that was being evoked in a melancholy way in *Profils paysans : l'approche* and was beginning to fracture in *Profils paysans : le quotidien* really has passed into something different here, something recognisable as peasant life but much more fragmented, something that borders on the disjointed. We see this contrast most clearly when Marcel and Germaine Challaye milk the cows. We are back in the same setting of the stirring deep-focus shot of *Profils paysans : l'approche*: the cow barn. But instead of a patient long take, set well back from the characters, the first image of the sequence is basically a medium shot, and the milking unfolds in a slow montage of images, some of which even have pans. There is, of course, nothing unusual about this on the surface. This is the grammar of conventional documentary, the grammar of modern nonfiction cinema. But *Profils paysans : l'approche*, like so much of Depardon's cinema, was really defined by a seemingly antiquated conception of film grammar. Now, in *Profils paysans : la vie moderne*, cinematic form, like the world that Depardon evokes, has had to give way. It's still recognisable as distinct, but it has moved with the times.

This shift is most clear in the interview where we return to Amandine Gagnaire. Here she is at the kitchen table with her two kids (baby on her lap, toddler at the head) and her husband Michel, with the camera head-on. Depardon starts the sequence by saying on voiceover that they have no farm even though Michel is a farmer's son (although they talk about having a bit of land for enough livestock to make cheese), that they are stuck paying on a mortgage until 2026, and are generally unable to fully devote themselves to agriculture. As the conversation around the table moves along, though, Depardon cuts to a close-up of Amandine, who talks about raising her kids as

being a full-time job. Then he cuts to a close-up of Michel; he doesn't speak, but we still hear Amandine talking about how it's nice to be able to raise a few animals and make some cheese, but they are trying to avoid taking on too much debt. This flash of shot/reverse-shot is coupled with a vivid evocation of the post-peasant experience. In the place of land there are cramped spaces, in the place of overwhelming work is overwhelming debt. And in the place of long, uninterrupted takes is shot/reverse-shot, the fragmenting of a unified space into smaller, more easily consumable pieces. This is post-artisanal film grammar being used to evoke a post-peasant world.

The trilogy is thus a kind of nexus for Depardon's tripartite aesthetics Lumière, Bazin, Astruc. We can see him struggling, Astruc-style, to escape "the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake," as he centralises images that convey both the aspiration to continuity (precisely composed long takes that echo the slow, precise and anachronistic techniques that are specific to this region) and of the inescapable rupture of that continuity (flashes of découpage that interrupt these sumptuous long takes, as young farmers explain the cotemporary impossibility of earning an actual living through agriculture). He advances his critique of this rupture by placing a deep faith in the reality that he marshals to express his engaged but mournful view of the world. I allude here, of course, to Bazin's well-known distinction between "those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality."¹⁶ Writing in his 1958 essay "L'évolution du langage cinématographique," Bazin was at pains to point out that this was the real distinction in film language ("la ligne de faille esthétique" is the term he uses), and that the split between sound and silent film was relatively minor in comparison. Writing in his homage to the great Italian filmmaker Vittorio de Sica, Bazin stated that in de Sica's cinema, "There is not one image that is not charged with meaning, that does not drive home into the mind the sharp end of an unforgettable moral truth, and not one that to this end is false to the ontological ambiguity of reality. Not one gesture, not one incident, not a single object in the film is given a prior significance derived from the ideology of the director."¹⁷ This is very close to what Frédéric Sabouraud meant when he wrote that Depardon's cinema was far from being a militant set of questions ("une problématique militant et réductrice" is the term he uses), and that it drives home the sharp ends of moral truths precisely because it privileges the conflicts, contradictions, rifts and sufferings that Sabouraud sees as central to his vision of the world. This lack of explicit militancy leaves cinéma vérité, an important inspiration for Depardon, open to critique as an apolitical, voyeuristic form. But in its most fully-realised forms the school has made a speciality of viscerally evoking just such conflicts, contradictions, rifts and sufferings. Much the same criticism could be levelled, of course, at the Lumière brothers; aren't their little 50-second films just moving snapshots, the pseudo-scientific tinkering of some privileged industrialists and their employees? Such an analysis is for me irredeemably simplistic; the essence of the Lumière aesthetic is that it offers a small, highly subjective window onto the world, and an important aspect of that subjectivity is a palpable desire to escape the limitations of the late 19th century worldview and find a vision that is both more cosmopolitan (hence the *actualités* the Lumières had shot in places like Belfast or Jerusalem) and more attuned to the tiny details of the everyday. That is a pretty fair summary of the films of Raymond Depardon.

My crucial point here about the Lumières' achievement is that it is to be found at the level of their *aesthetic*, just as for both Bazin and Astruc the ethical possibilities of filmmaking were really a matter of form, not subject matter. That is just as true of Depardon. The films that he made early in his career were aesthetically sophisticated but defined by a subject matter that made it easy to ignore those aesthetics and focus on what could very well have been a series of splashy newspaper stories: to exclude the Chad films or *Délits flagrants* entirely, we could point to 1974, *une partie de campagne* (1974, about the French presidential election), *Reporters* (1981, about the French paparazzi), *10^e chambre : instants d'audience* (2004, another film about the French justice system). The *Profils paysans* films, though, are impossible to understand without some consideration of form narrative structure. The slowness of the exposition, the awkwardness of the compositions, the isolated moments of startling visual beauty: these are the aspects of the "Profils paysans" films that are the most pronounced, the most immediately striking. Very little information is conveyed, and very little story is told in any of these films. Their critique of capitalism's tendency to homogenise culture is contained in their refusal to conform to the demands of cinematic efficacy or clarity.

It's all a bit 1970s, I suppose, this tendency to ascribe an inherently progressive political sensibility to a non-mainstream form, and this is the sort of tendency that this journal's two most beloved late contributors, Andrew Britton and Robin Wood, spent a lot of time critiquing.¹⁸ No doubt there is much truth in their shared sense of Hollywood cinema's radical possibilities, and much to be said for their shared scepticism that highly unorthodox formal patterns inherently constitute a radical politics. But as I have tried to show, Depardon's films do not deny pleasure in the name of a political statement in the manner of much 1970s and 70s-influenced counter-cinema. Indeed, I think that kind of filmmaking, which so annoyed Wood and Britton alike, is exactly what Sabouraud was talking about when he invoked the spectre of "une problématique militante et réductrice," a *problématique* that he sees Depardon utterly rejecting. And for that matter, Depardon's form isn't really all that radical. Less than an anti-pleasure militant, Depardon is an anti-centralisation melancholic. He longs not for a world, or a cinema, where we all have to work harder, but instead a world, and a filmmaking practice, where *different* ways of working, and this different ways of moving through the world, can survive. His career has been spent subjecting institutions that are peculiar to modernity—media-savvy guerrilla movements, highly efficient criminal justice systems, the celebrity-obsessed press—to an unblinking scrutiny. His "Profils paysans" series is a the culmination of that project, the films where all the timely and eventually dated subject matter fades away and we are left with only a few basic elements: landscape, sequence shots, critique. Let's put it another way: Lumière, Bazin, Astruc. The illusion of detached objectivity that hides a rich subjectivity; an intense desire to drive home moral truths; a belief that cinema allows us break away from the tyranny of the visual and really lay out a philosophy in a new way: this is the combination that defines Depardon's *Profils paysans*. What it adds up to is window onto the world that drives home the sharp moral point that modernity has made difference impossible, and that only by escaping the tyranny of the visual, the tyranny of conventional documentary, can we can get a sense of what we have lost.

Notes

- 1 Jay Kuhnner, "A Man with a Movie Camera: Raymond Depardon's Recent Films," *Cinema Scope* 23 (Summer 2005), 35.
- 2 In addition to feeling the influence of the Lumières in a general way because of being born near Lyon, Depardon has made a number of works that strongly recall their aesthetic, mostly as part of omnibus films. In 1991 he contributed to the omnibus film *Contre l'oubli*, offering a 3-minute, single-shot and camera-movement-free film called *Pour Alirio de Jesus Pedraza Becerra, Colombie* (it is on the DVD collection "Depardon Cinéaste" under the title *Cartagena*). He also participated in the 1995 omnibus film *Lumière et compagnie*, wherein 41 filmmakers were each asked to make a 50-second, single-shot film with the camera used by the Lumière Brothers.
- 3 Raymond Depardon and Frédéric Sabouraud, *Depardon/Cinéma* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1993), 11; my translation.
- 4 *Cinéma/Depardon*, 10.
- 5 *Cinéma/Depardon*, 11.
- 6 Alexandre Astruc, "The birth of a new avant garde: La caméra-stylo", in Peter Graham, ed., *The New Wave* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 19; no translator is given. In French: Alexandre Astruc, *Du stylo à la caméra et de la caméra au stylo: Écrits (1942-1984)* (Paris: L'Archipel, 1992), 325.
- 7 Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant Garde," 18 / *Du stylo à la caméra*, 325.
- 8 André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* v.1, Hugh Gray, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 37. In French: André Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Éditions du cerf, 2000), 281.
- 9 Raymond Depardon, 1968: *Une année autour du monde* (Paris: Points, 2008), 16; my translation.
- 10 Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant Garde," 20 / *Du stylo à la caméra*, 327.
- 11 Depardon actually went back to Africa after making his Chad films, so this isn't as perfect a circle as I imply here. His other African films are *Yemen* (1973), *Empty Quarter (Une femme en Afrique)* (1985), *Afriques, Comment ça va avec la douleur ?* (1996), and *Un homme sans l'occident* (2003). This is to say nothing of *La captive du désert* (1989), Depardon's only fiction film, which was based on the events of the Françoise Claustre kidnapping; that film deserves an article unto itself.
- 12 Depardon's book *La ferme du Gare* (Paris: Éditions Carré, 1995) is in some ways a follow-up to this work; it is mostly comprised of photos taken of his family's farm. This was published in English as *Our Farm* (Paris: Actes Sud/DisVoir, 2007). The image "Villefranche-sur-Saône, 'Le Gare' Farmhouse, The Photographer's Mother," found in both editions, strongly recalls the kitchen interviews of the "Profils paysans" series, which I will discuss shortly.
- 13 John Berger, *Pig Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), 196.
- 14 Depardon has made another film about the French justice system that is somewhat more easily available to English-speaking audiences: *10^e chambre—Instants d'audience* (2004), which has also been released on an English-subtitled DVD as *10th District Court*. That said, *Délits flagrants* is one of the films in Arte Vidéo's "Depardon Cinéaste" box set that has optional English subtitles.
- 15 Kuehner, 36.
- 16 Bazin, *What is Cinema?* v.1, 24 / *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, 64.
- 17 Bazin, *What is Cinema?* v.2, 68 / *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, 318.
- 18 On Britton's side I would direct readers to his exchange with Janine Marchessault, "The Politics of Difference," in *CineAction* 17 (1989), where he was particularly critical of the politics and aesthetics of the Berwick Street Collective, heroes of 70s counter-cinema (p.9). On Wood's side I think the most relevant example is his essay "An Irresponsible Article" in *CineAction* 35 (1994), where he criticised John Greyson in part because he "sides with Brecht against Lukacs, but it is Brecht filtered through Godard, a 'false' Brechtianism" (p.13), one that does not pay sufficient attention to Brecht's refusal to entirely abandon popular forms, a "false Brechtianism" that was also very typical of 70s militant cinema.

Sources for the films on video

The "Profils paysans" trilogy is published as a box set in France by Arte Vidéo, and is easily ordered at Amazon.fr (AISN: B001T4ENCC). It includes *Les années déclin*. They are PAL-format, region-free discs. They do not have English subtitles.

Profils paysans : la vie moderne has been released in an English-subtitled version by Soda Pictures in the UK. It is titled *Modern Life*, and is easily ordered at Amazon.co.uk (AISN: B001X22XRC). It is PAL-format and region 2.

The box set "Depardon Cinéaste" is published in France by Arte Vidéo, and is easily ordered at Amazon.fr (AISN: B000GH2X34). They are PAL-format, region-free discs. The box set has the following feature-length films: 1974, *une partie de campagne*, *San Clemente*, *Reporters*, *Faits divers*, *Empty Quarter: une femme en Afrique*, *Urgences*, *La captive du désert*, *Délits flagrants*, *Afriques, comment ça va avec la douleur?*, *Un Homme sans l'Occident*, *10^e chambre, instants d'audience*. It also has the following shorts: *Ian Palach, Révolutionnaires du Tchad*, *10 minutes of silence for John Lennon*, *New York NY, Contact "Raymond Depardon"* and *Cartagena*. Most of the feature-length films have English subtitles; none of the shorts do.

Christian Marclay's *The Clock*

THE CINEMA AND REAL-TIME

By JACOB POTEPSKI

Christian Marclay is a Swiss-American artist. He is mostly known for his work in experimental music. Marclay pioneered the art of turntablism in the seventies, and has worked with avant-garde musicians such as John Zorn, Elliot Sharp, and Yoshihide Otomo. *The Clock* combines clips from thousands of films into a 24-hour collage that also functions as a working clock. The film took over two years to make. It was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 2011, and has been screened at numerous major art galleries around the world. It will be screened at Toronto's Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in the fall.

Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010), the film that won the Golden Lion at this year's Venice Biennale and was quickly snapped up by a number of major galleries (including MOMA and the National Gallery of Canada) is literally a clock, or a perfect simulacra of one. Having found a clip for every minute of the day, Marclay spliced them together to form the moving-image of a 24h clock, which, as if to make the likeness complete, is projected in real-time. The discovery that there is an image for every minute of the day served as a reminder that the cinema has always been concerned if not obsessed with time. However, the concern has not always been with real-time. One could even say that the cinema has always presented us with the opposite; with invented, imaginary time, which makes us oblivious to the realities of the day. But the escape for the present—*The Clock* reminds us—is never complete. Real-time goes on; passing *along* with the time of the film. Marclay's work raises questions about the relation between these two times and how it affects the experience of cinema.

On first impression, the film not only gives us an identical representation of real-time, but constantly serves to remind us

of its presence. Functioning as a commentary on the cinema, it seems to say that no matter how hard they try, the movies will never make us oblivious to the present and to all the anxieties that are wrapped up with it. Considered more metaphysically, *The Clock* seems to argue that real-time is reality itself; the light, as it were, behind the play of shadows; which the cinema serves as its master. This is how a number of commentators have seen the film.¹ Real-time, however, is simply an abstract frame of measure. The 24h clock (the minute or the hour) for example, serves as a common denominator by which a variety of events, irrespective of their differences, can be objectively quantified and measured. Real-time, in other words, is a homogeneous medium. Modern philosophers, beginning with Henri Bergson, have argued that while treating time as an object that can be measured can be very useful, it fails to account for the creativity of time, by virtue of which every moment is different.² Is the cinema a homogeneous medium, which reduces every moment to a common measure; or does it, rather, make a difference in time, transforming the world by way of the image? This is the question that *The Clock* raises.

It seems to me that when we assimilate the time of the film to real-time, the image (past) to the real (present), we miss the play of difference that really makes Marclay's film *tick*. In fact, in every image of *The Clock* the distinctive mark of a moment comes strikingly into view. The film is a moving spectacle of time-pieces of the most diverse kind. Each time-piece marks the present time of the narrative as well as the real-time of day, as though they were one. But the images are marked historically. Not only the grandfather clocks, even the wrist watch, the leather-strap variety (for example, on the hand of Sean Connery as James Bond) will appear retro for the young viewer, who is likely to check his cell phone for the "corresponding" time... The mark of history is also revealed by the fashions and styles of filmmaking, which distinguish the images from one another. The spectacle of time-pieces therefore also functions as a spectacle of the history of the cinema; wherein one and the same

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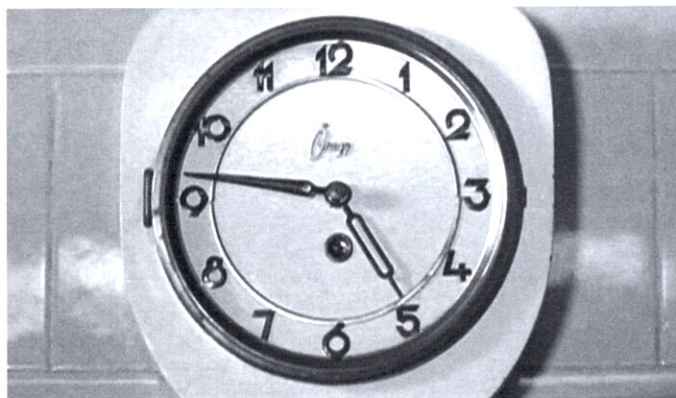
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theme, time, appears in *innumerable* variations. Projecting these images in sync with the present effectively allows their datedness to come to the fore. Difference stands out through the contrast.

However, *The Clock* is doubly dated. For it is also dated as a present, a present projection of the past, in reference to real time. The film is not simply defined by the archival material that it samples. It appropriates images past and makes a new present out of them; each one serving as a part, a minute or less, of a new 24 hour cycle. Every image is thus present and past "at the same time." But the coincidence is established between heterogeneous times.

The two registers of time appear as identical only if we ignore the historical markers that distinguish the images from one another and from the present of the viewer; that is, if we reduce the film to the empty frame of real-time. In fact, the coincidence—of, for example, 4:55pm marked by a Lubitsch film and 4:55pm in Vienna—serves to confuse the coherence of both registers, as it brings them together *while* holding them apart. The two times, the real and the cinematic, past and present, remain distinct while becoming indiscernible. In other words, precisely where and when we would expect to find a perfectly symmetrical identity, that is, in the present of *The Clock*, there is a disorienting play of difference, which sees the real and the cinematic pass into one another, and perpetually exchange places.

The disorientation takes place not only between each image and its real-time referent, but also between the film as a whole, that is, the 24 hour sequence of the film, and the corresponding 24 hour real-time sequence. In this regard as well the film only seems to move in line with the chronology of real-time. But considering the historical markers of the images, the film is oblivious to chronology. For example, at around 7:00 am a Rube Goldberg machine wakes up Michael J. Fox (Marty McFly)

from *Back to the Future*, made in 1985; and then a naked JoBeth Williams jumps out of bed after a one-night stand with Dustin Hoffman, screaming as she runs into a young boy in the hallway, from *Kramer vs Kramer*, made in 1979. What came before, in the order of history, comes after, in the order of real-time (the order of the present projection). The film takes the greatest liberties in leaping back and forward in time. However, what holds this crazy montage together, and what gives the film its proper rhythm, is the fact that it coincides with the sequence of the real. The chronological order is constituted at the same time that it is unravelled. Time is reversed *while* it marches on. There are effectively two heterogeneous clocks, a virtual and a real, nested within or superimposed upon one another; and each serves to displace and to confuse the identity of the other, by virtue of their coincidence.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the film is the fluidity that Marclay achieves in moving from one disparate image to another, creating the illusion that all of these moments are going on in one continuous time, which contributes greatly to the sense that the assembled film is taking place in real-time. We move across different periods of the cinema as characters move across the threshold of a doorway, entering the door in a film from one period and existing in another. The irony, however, is that these are all *false continuities*. The seemingly rational developments of events, and the real-time illusion that it creates, betrays itself as a series of irrational cuts and impossible transitions. *The Clock* flows, in other words, but it flows against the grain of real-time.

In the history of writing on film not much is to be found regarding the relation between the cinema and real-time. However, Stanley Cavell's reflections on the two-sided nature of the screen might help us to think about the sense of Marclay's *mixing* of time(s). In *The World Viewed*, Cavell asks: "what happens to reality when it is projected and screened?"³ He writes:

13 14 15 16 17 18



"What does the silver screen? It screen me from the world it holds—that is, makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me—that is, screens its existence from me" (24). The cinema makes present a world that is absent. It makes it present to a viewer that remains absent from it. Interestingly, Cavell conceives this relation between absence and presence in terms of time; adding, "and a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present (through no fault of my subjectivity), is a world past" (23). The barrier of the screen functions, from this point of view, as a line dividing the time of the film, the world of the film that took place in that time, and the present from whence the viewer peers out. "That the projected world does not exist (now) is its only difference from reality" (24). This minor difference of time is almost imperceptible, so deeply interfused are the two heterogeneous registers of the screen.

The Clock exploits and does not simply level the interval that joins while separating the time of the viewer (the present of the projection) to that of the screen. Both times are affected, reciprocally transformed, and destabilized in the process. However, the time of *The Clock* is neither simply the present of real-time nor the hermetically sealed time of film. Neither past nor present, neither real nor imaginary, neither the time of the screen nor that from which it is screened; but both *at the same time*; the film de-realized the real and makes the cinematic (that is, the virtual or imaginary register) actual.

The notion of a de-realization of the real and a corresponding actualization of a purely cinematic or virtual register recalls Gilles Deleuze's work on cinema. The crystal/time image, which he valorizes as one of cinema's greatest accomplishments, is Janus-faced: virtual and real, past and present, at the same time.⁴ By virtue of this duplicity, the image actualizes a heterogeneous time; that is, a creative time which makes difference, differentiating the real in relation to the virtual, the present in relation to the past, incessantly. However, the examples that

Deleuze gives of this cinematic accomplishment almost always refer to the functions of the narrative (for example, the status of the character within the context of the story). *The Clock*, on the other hand, actualizes a heterogeneous time by mobilizing functions which are specific to the cinema alone: the archive, or the memory of the image, which retains the mark of the past; and projection, which brings the archive to life. That is to say, it exploits the gap between the time registered and the time projected (in Cavell's words, between the past and the present of the screen)—a gap that lies at the heart of the cinematographic apparatus—to create a two-sided clock, which simultaneously recalls the past and makes it present anew.

Contrary to first impressions then, *The Clock* is nothing like a real clock. It does not repeat the same movement, the same Now, ad infinitum. If we see the film as a meta-commentary on the cinema as a whole, which it invites to do, it does not suggest that the cinema is in service of the real. Rather, projecting the difference that the cinema makes in time, it suggests that the cinema never simply keeps time, that in fact every film beats to its own measure. Each film is a clock, in other words, but essentially an idiosyncratic one.

Notes

- 1 For example, in his *Artforum* February 2011 review ("Borrowed Time") David Velasco wrote that the film serves as a reminder "that every camera, every image, can be put in service of the real."
- 2 Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F.L. Pogson (Dover Publications, INC., 2001). Throughout his work Bergson argued that lived-time is creative, ever-changing, heterogeneous, and productive of the new; whereas the common representations of time, which we inherit from the tradition of rational philosophy, reduce it to a static, homogeneous object, very much like space.
- 3 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Harvard University Press, 1979), 23.
- 4 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

The Imagery of Surveillance

IN A LONELY PLACE

"There is no art that is not supported by a culture and there is no culture without historical judgment."

—Andre Bazin, "Toward a Cinematic Criticism." *French Cinema of the Occupation and Resistance: the Birth of a Critical Esthetic*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1981 p.59.

By TONY WILLIAMS

After its virtual neo-extinction due to facile academic fashion, close reading is now making a much needed return as collections such as *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film* and renewed attention to the writings of Andrew Britton reveal.¹ Long victimized by the rigid practices of *Screen* that regarded the viewer as a passive consumer forcibly inserted into a text dominated by conservative ideology associated with the very nature of narrative cinema, the role of the active viewer in close reading is now recognized today whether associated with the cognitive school of film criticism or those continuing the *Movie* tradition of analysis. Unfortunately, close reading has often been mistakenly identified with the 1950's American tradition of New Criticism that focused exclusively on the text while ignoring its relevant social and historical background. This a-political reading was a product of McCarthyism anticipating neo-conservative definitions of postmodernism influenced by the Reagan Revolution. Any establishment that does not wish certain political issues raised either in public or within textual spheres of art, film, and literature often welcomes a discourse that sees any work in isolation from its broader social context. However, despite the common assumption that close reading should exclusively focus upon the text, many instances occur revealing a complementary relationship between detailed analysis and social forces influencing the structure of the work itself, forces that are by no means arbitrarily imposed from outside. Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950) is one such example. Hence the choice of this opening quotation by Andre Bazin that argues against seeing any cinematic text in isolation from its historical context.

Correctly cited as one of the director's great achievements in Hollywood, *In a Lonely Place* is often regarded as a mirror image of the tormented relationship existing between Ray and his then-wife Gloria Grahame who were on the verge of divorce. Such an interpretation occurs in the recent biography on Ray by Patrick McGilligan. "It wasn't hard for the director, with his empathy and admiration for Bogart, to view the tortured writer Dix as a crazy-mirror version of himself. And with Grahame playing Laurel, it would have been impossible for Ray not to see their fragile love story as a twisted commentary on his own marriage."² This interpretation has to be measured against

other alternatives. The appearance of warring partners in a particular film is well-known in Hollywood as Frank Tashlin's *Hollywood or Bust* (1956) and Sean Penn's *The Crossing Guard* (1995) reveal. One may ask whether knowledge of the Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis tensions on the set and the appearance of Jack Nicholson and Anjelica Huston together after their personal break-up add anything to our appreciation and understanding of the films themselves. Both "partners" maintain a professional decorum on screen despite the problematic relationship of their personal lives. The scene showing Ray haranguing a young student actress on the set of *We Can't Go Home Again* in the 1973 documentary *I'm a Stranger Here Myself* (often cited by his detractors) may have less to do with the director's unmotivated ill-temper but more with his irritation at personal baggage being brought on to the set preventing the delivery of a good performance. If film is a collaborative art with the director synthesizing all the elements at his disposal into a coherent production, personal issues take second place to professional performance. Although McGilligan may assert "how closely the film's bleak, paranoid atmosphere echoed persistent elements of Ray's own domestic life", there is little support for this within the film's text as there is for McGilligan's belief that Ray did "name names."³

In a Lonely Place is one of classical Hollywood's richest cinematic texts stimulating critical interpretations that must originate from the film itself. One such interpretation involves excavating the film's indirect references to the prevailing Red Scare hysteria that not only ruined many talents in that era such as Group Theatre veteran Art Smith (named by Elia Kazan) who appears in the film as Dixon's agent Mel but also caused tensions in the minds of people like Ray himself who felt he could have been subpoenaed at any moment. *In a Lonely Place* is a film that deals with the destruction of a romantic relationship. However, this destruction results not only from internal tensions within the leading characters but also from outside forces that caused these tensions in the first place. During the blacklist many marriages collapsed and families disintegrated as a result of intrusive surveillance techniques. In this light *In a Lonely Place* may be viewed as a film dealing with the pernicious influence of surveillance and suspicion rooted within its historical period



In a Lonely Place

making it a very important cultural text but one whose meanings could only be expressed indirectly within that reactionary time.

In a Lonely Place was released in May 1950, three years after the HUAC investigation of supposed Communist influence in Hollywood that eventually led to the imprisonment of the Hollywood Ten and a year before the renewal of the witch-hunt against so-called Hollywood subversives. Although Ray and his colleagues would not know about this renewal, they obviously expected another fresh wave of reactionary assault in which nobody would be safe. 1950 was also the year that saw the beginning of Senator Joseph McCarthy's attacks on American civil liberties. Bogart himself had already publicly recanted his support of the Hollywood Ten after 1947 when he flew to the hearings in Washington D.C. as a member of the Committee for the First Amendment along with Lauren Bacall, Sterling Hayden, Danny Kaye, Paul Henreid, Richard Conte, and others. It was also the year that Congress approved a Bill setting up "emergency" concentration camps in an amendment co-sponsored by the future President Kennedy. Although *Johnny Guitar* (1954) has been widely interpreted as an allegory of the blacklist, it was not the first film by Ray to criticize Cold War paranoia and its pathological effects on human beings. This honor belongs to *In a Lonely Place*.

The Role of Surveillance

In a Lonely Place opens with that classic shot revealing Dixon Steele's eyes seen through his rear-window as he drives through the dark streets of Hollywood. Although often interpreted as

one of the key images in the film noir stylistic lexicon, the image parallels similar ones that occur throughout the film. Despite the fact that Place and Peterson's classic article originally published in 1974, cite this as an example of film noir's existential isolation and loneliness affecting the male protagonist of this movement, it can also operate as a visual metaphor both for the surveillance Steele will endure for the rest of the film as well as the guilt others project on to him.⁴ Even viewers may doubt Steele's "innocence" since no firm assurance is ever offered that he did not commit the crime like the character in the original source novel. Steele is under the spotlight both as a Hollywood figure and a suspected murderer whom the Police Captain still continues to regard as a "guilty man" even when he appears to be officially cleared by a confession.

Style and *mise-en-scène* operate stylistically and materially within the text functioning as metaphors for entrapment, both psychologically and historically. Place and Peterson cite a second instance in the film where Dixon/Humphrey Bogart and Laurel/Gloria Grahame exchange looks when viewing each other from their respective apartments when Dixon seeks distraction from the banal plot synopsis of a bad novel that Mildred Atkinson/Martha Stewart recites. Place and Peterson describe them as "lonely characters isolated by framing devices in a composition of constricting vertical and horizontal lines manage to bridge the distance between them with a dramatic diagonal of exchanged glances..."⁵ This visual depiction of entrapment may not only describe the present feelings of Dixon and Laurel: one seeking escape from bad assignments of post-war Hollywood screenwriting and the other fleeing from



an unsatisfactory relationship with a businessman but also foreshadows the future barriers which later separate them due to police surveillance. He will later suspect her of betrayal while she believes that he is a murderer. Their exchange of gazes in this scene showing them separated in a deep focus shot surrounded by revealing *mise-en-scene* elements of horizontal and vertical images that aptly describe both their present and future entrapment. Finally, in reference to other images from the film cited by Place and Peterson, a nightclub sequence featuring Dixon and Laurel in a balanced two-shot reflecting one of their rare moments of safety and security cuts to an upsetting two-shot in choker close-up as a policeman enters with his girlfriend leading to "intimacy being invaded."⁶ Experiencing Dixon's anger, the cop brushes this off to his girlfriend (who bears an uncanny resemblance to Sylvia Nicolai) as a confrontation with an unstable personality, but for all we know he may have been placed on surveillance duty in the same way as Brub Nicolai/Frank Lovejoy. Towards the end of his interrogation, Dixon asks Lochner/Carl Benton Reid whether their conversation has been recorded on tape or wire, a remark he makes in jest. But the situation is serious. Brub replies "Tape" and Lochner follows with "Here's the mike." Ray and scenarist Andrew Solt have constructed a very revealing screenplay. Due to Ray's years studying architecture with Frank Lloyd Wright, the film uses contrasting horizontal and vertical planes prominently within its *mise-en-scene* as in the curtain behind Dixon in the nightclub following his brawl with Junior/Lewis Howard, the curtains in his apartment, and the dressing gown he wears. In one scene, Dixon approaches the Los Angeles Police

Department building that is a vertical structure dominating the environment. Perhaps this may represent an ironic comment that the New Deal progressive architectural designs of Wright are now being appropriated for imprisonment, both physical and mental in the post-war era?

Apart from the opening credit scene and some night scenes, *In a Lonely Place* lacks the distinctive features of noir cinematography as defined by Place and Peterson in their classic essay. Instead, as George Turner points out in his article "Heart of Darkness" originally published in *American Cinematographer*, Burnett Guffey's photography is more subtle than his work on previous noirs with "normal scenes" rendered in a more naturalistic lighting, a look that differs little from the style favored for light romantic movies. "But, as Turner continues, such a style is deceptive, especially in terms of "carefully designed scenes with little camera movement to alter the compositions" that can have an entrapment effect. Turner concludes his paragraph as follows. "The compositions have an almost subliminal effect, becoming increasingly claustrophobic as the story develops. These shots mirror Laurel's fears and her sense of being trapped in cars and small rooms, or imprisoned by the alternately loving and menacing hands of Dix and the hovering attentions of Martha and Lochner."⁷

This sense of claustrophobia engendered by outside sources traps both Dixon and Laurel as two frequently cited sequences reveal. Invited to dinner by Brub (played by an actor who would portray the title role of informant in *I was a Communist for the FBI* a year later), a situation engineered by the devious Captain Lochner who manipulates a subordinate officer to trap his

friend in a scheme that could have been engineered by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, Dixon performs the role of a Hollywood director in getting Brub and his wife Sylvia/Jeff Donnell to play the roles of murderer and victim. During this scene as Place and Peterson note⁸ a strange high-light under Bogart's eyes injects a sinister, demented quality into his mock description of his part in the murder in *In a Lonely Place*.⁸ Dixon certainly appears dangerous and could be capable of murder. However, other readings are possible. First, even the film's version of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *The Organization Man* Brub gets carried away by the performance and nearly strangles his wife blurring supposedly rigid boundaries between normality and abnormality in this scene. Brub's "Mr. Average" of the Cold War era is capable of murder. Secondly, the exaggerated light under Dixon's eyes parallels a police spotlight grilling a suspect leading to the expected mental collapse so that he will confess and "name names." Another "spotlight" effect appears in the scene when Laurel listens to the suspicions of her masseuse Martha/Hope Emerson against Dixon which echo those of Lochner. Although Martha utters what is really in Laurel's mind as Victor Perkins notes, these suspicions have been articulated by an outside force and will eventually lead to the breakup of a relationship.⁹ *In a Lonely Place* can be read as a romantic tragedy but one having many parallels to the disruption of relationships affecting couples and families during the period of the blacklist.

What Makes Dixon Run?

In a Lonely Place could also be placed within the context of the "Hollywood-on-Hollywood" sub-genre represented by films such as, *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1953), *The Big Knife* (1955), and *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) and *The Legend of Lylah Clare* (1968) as well as novels such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished *The Last Tycoon* and Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941). All these texts deal with creative talents ruined by the commercial vulgarity of Hollywood. However, *The Big Knife* does retain elements from Clifford Odets's original 1949 play to suggest that betrayal of the New Deal ideals of the 1930s and American progressive literature such as Jack London and Upton Sinclair are key elements in the tragic dilemma of Charlie Castle/Jack Palance, a character modeled on John Garfield whose death was caused by blacklist harassment.¹⁰ According to Victor Perkins, Dixon's character, "who has not written a hit before the war, seems to owe much to the character and legend of Herman J. Mankiewicz" whom John Houseman compares to Ray as being "two of the most violently self-destructive men I have ever known."¹¹ Mankiewicz also scripted *A Woman's Secret* that Ray directed in 1949 which may be the basis of the awful novel Dixon is expected to adapt for the screen. However, other possibilities exist within the film suggesting reasons why Dixon behaves in the way that he does.

According to Joseph McBride, one of the most common techniques in screenwriting involves the use of character biography, a device writers use to reveal formative experiences in the life of fictional figures that have existed before they appear on the screen. Such mini-biographies may be absent from the text as with Frank Nugent's background history for Colonel Owen Thursday in *Fort Apache* (1948) but exist in the film itself for alert viewers to recognize.¹² This latter practice occurs in *In a Lonely Place* and separates Dixon from the "disillusioned writer trapped in the Hollywood machine" figure stereotypical-

ly represented by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Dixon Steele's background is much more historically grounded. The film informs us that Dixon was a successful screenwriter in the pre-war era but has returned to a very different Hollywood following the end of his military service, something that Mankiewicz never experienced. Mel mentions that he has been Dixon's agent for twenty years. Like most veterans Dixon may have had trouble adjusting to post-war society. Brub served with Dixon during his wartime service and regarded him as a good officer. But Captain Lochner becomes immediately suspicious of Dixon's attitude when he shows him photos of the murdered girl. Instead of displaying expected emotional mannerisms, Dixon instead reveals an unemotional attitude that leads to Lochner using his best friend to trap him in social situations beginning a surveillance that intrudes into personal friendship.¹³ Lochner ignores the fact that Dixon has probably witnessed many dead bodies in combat and the photo of one corpse will not affect him to the degree it would an ordinary civilian. Instead, Dixon grieves privately by sending flowers to Mildred's home, a low-key action that parallels his sending \$300 to the U.C.L.A. football player he later injures. These are private gestures understandable to most veterans who prefer private grief and regret to public displays of emotion. By contrast, Mildred's boyfriend Kesler/Jack Reynolds, who still lives at home with his parents, became "terribly upset" when informed of her death thus displaying the correct emotional response for Lochner. Dixon wonders whether the police intend to arrest him for "lack of emotion." Since he has obviously witnessed the horrors of war in combat, Dixon will not react like a normal civilian when notified about somebody's death since he has had a long experience of coping with it in his own particular way.

Viewers may initially become suspicious of Dixon's response and regard him as a "sick man" as does Sylvia who has studied psychology in university. However, if we understand Dixon to be suffering from P.T.S.D., a yet-undefined official medical condition but one which affected veterans as seen in the anger exhibited by future novelist James Jones when he returned to Robinson, Illinois and the banning of John Huston's revealing documentary *Let there be Light* (1946) dealing with the effects of combat on soldiers, then Dixon's violent behavior (though not inexcusable) becomes understandable. Andrew Solt's screenplay contains an indirect reference to wartime when Brub remarks, "You make me homesick for some of the worst years of our lives" a play on William Wyler's *The Best Years of our Lives* (1946) where returning veterans readjust to society in the usual utopian Hollywood fashion. Dixon's police record actually begins during February 1946 to March 1947. Also, as Mel comments, Dixon's mood swings are nothing new for him. "You were in one of those moods that keep me awake all night." Dixon also appears on the verge of collapse following his brief skirmish with Junior placing his hand on his forehead as if about to experience a mental attack. Nothing is recorded in the police file about his pre-war behavior suggesting that Dixon's violent behavior is the result of P.T.S.D. However, Lochner regards Dixon's attitude as equivalent to those subpoenaed Hollywood Ten victims who refused to grovel before Authority and immediately sees him as the "guilty man." Refusing to acknowledge connections between Dixon's violent behavior and his wartime service, the suspicious Captain remarks "What else has he done?" preferring to act in the inhumane manner of an Inspector Javert pursuing his own version of Jean Valjean. He also remarks about Dixon, "He's hiding something and I doubt

if it is the proverbial heart of gold." This sentence suggests that Lochner may really be seeking a "heart of red" concealed within his prey in the manner of many aggressive and prejudiced interrogators during HUAC hearings. As George Turner notes in terms of lighting techniques used by Burnett Guffey to define visually Captain Lochner, "Carl Benton Reid (without his trademark moustache) is convincing as a relentless Nemesis. In some tense scenes with Grahame, Reid's close-ups are lit to give him an almost satanic appearance, with eyes and lower face veiled in deep shadows."¹⁴ One could go further and suggest that the actor's appearance resembles a composite of reactionary Senator Martin Dies (whose pre-war investigations into Hollywood foreshadowed HUAC) and J. Edgar Hoover, both of whom were clean-shaven and had the same physical build. When a cop comments about Dixon, "He plays rough", Lochner replies, "So do I", and begins his pursuit in the manner of a vengeful J. Parnell Thomas.

After his first encounter with Lochner, Dixon returns home and teases Mel about his supposed involvement in Mildred's death. Mel balances the choice between "get(ing) you a lawyer or across the border to Mexico." This line is by no means accidental within the film's historical context since many victims of McCarthyism fled across the border to avoid persecution at this time.¹⁵ During this sequence, Ray cross-cuts to Lochner compiling evidence on Dixon's violent past that he hopes to use against him in a future murder charge.

Another revealing aspect in the film is its discussion of normality, one not necessarily confined to violent expressions. Laurel becomes attracted to Dix because she finds him interesting. Brub describes Dixon to Sylvia as an "exciting guy". She responds, "He's exciting because he isn't normal. He's abnormal." Sylvia prefers Brub's version of the organization man in the gray flannel suit, "attractive and average." She tells him, "I'm glad you're not a genius. He's a sick guy", Sylvia deliberately ignores Brub's definition of Dixon as "superior." Her comments evoke the disdainful remarks made by Cold warriors against Albert Einstein when he protested against post-war paranoia. Brub discerns that her definition derives from her college classes in abnormal psychology. During this period psychiatrists often collaborated with HUAC by suggesting that their traumatized patients achieve sanity by testifying and "naming names", a dark page in American history later documented by Philip Saville in his little known film, *Fellow Traveller* (1989).¹⁶

Dixon is also an educated man fully conversant with the great tradition of classical literature that came under suspicion both before and during the HUAC period when both Euripides and Christopher Marlowe were regarded as communists by ignorant reactionary Congressmen.¹⁷ His friendship with Charlie Waterman/Robert Warwick may stem less from his sadness at a great actor now ignored by Hollywood who has reverted to alcoholism and more to the fact that they both shared similar ambitions of making Hollywood films equivalent to the great achievements of world literature, feelings that motivated writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and future blacklist victims like Clifford Odets. Hollywood has now become dominated by "popcorn salesmen" directors such as Lloyd Barnes/Morris Ankrum who make the same type of film *ad nauseum* or the son-in-law of a famous producer who has "set the business back fifty years." In a blacklist era where socially conscious films are taboo, this type of mindless entertainment becomes the norm driving educated talents such as Dixon to despair. Both he and Charlie know their Shakespeare but their

literary knowledge would also make them the targets of HUAC at this time when attacks on intellectual thought were rampant.¹⁸ Lochner comments about Dixon, "He's our most logical suspect." Sylvia also shares this feeling. Her remark to Laurel, "You should go away for a time, you really should" is spoken in a very excessive manner, so much so that she soon modifies her tone as if realizing that Laurel may discern her real motivations in warning her about finally achieving her Hollywood acting ambitions by starring in her own private version of *I Married a Communist* (1949), an assignment that Howard Hughes used in RKO as a loyalty test which Ray narrowly escaped directing. Far from being Laurel's "best friend", she is acting in the interests of the surveillance society in wishing to destroy the bond between Laurel and Dixon in the same way that Lochner's intrusive actions do when he uses Brub's friendship with Dixon to force him to act as a spy. Law enforcement and a conservative psychoanalytic establishment, represented by a married woman who once studied non-Freudian conformist American versions of psychoanalysis designed to make the patient accept the status quo, operate together in destroying a mature version of Ray's "last romantic couple".

1950 is three years away from 1947. It was the year not only of HUAC's first investigation into Hollywood but also one that witnessed the "last hurrah" of the Depression era generation's attempt to make films free from Hollywood corporate control as seen in Enterprise Studio's *Body and Soul* (1947) and the beginning of the system's retreat from films criticizing the status quo.¹⁹ It is now the time of beginning the appeal to undiscerning youth audiences represented by Mildred who defines an epic as "a picture that's real long and there's lots of things going on". She eagerly recites the plot of a banal novel to Dixon (and the camera) in an "in-your-face" manner leading Dixon to retreat to his window and the audience to cringe. As Mel says to Dixon, "Remember, she's your audience" to which Dixon responds, "Say that again and I'll get another agent." By initially rejecting this assignment Dixon shows he is not a team player as Mel recognizes. "Why do you have such a chip on your shoulder? Why do you have such a defiant attitude?" Sylvia may regard him as "abnormal" but if we view the character of Dixon Steele according to a particular cultural and historical background then his extreme behavior is understandable.

Returning from the battlefield to a Hollywood preferring to deny unpleasant realities, Dixon intuitively feels the "heart of darkness" existing in his own society although he has to control his own personal demons and negative reactions. After Dixon meets Kesler following the "noon rush at the Bank", he comments on this "normal" guy's strong grip, one he relates to the counting of money. Mr. Normal is actually an abnormal killer and a banker (another example of Ray's intuitive recognition of later events such as Wall Street culpability for certain events in this century?). Martha, "the only thing left from my movie career" as Laurel describes her, criticizes her desire to leave a plush mansion of a "good businessman who just wants to get married." Laurel already knows her former status as an economic entry in a balance sheet where her former lover installed a swimming pool not for her pleasure but to raise property values and charge her double rent. When she meets Dixon, they both form an immediate attraction to each other. They are both non-conformists in their own right. Although Sylvia "accidentally" reveals to Dixon that Laurel has recently seen Lochner, this supposed Freudian "slip" may also be deliberately designed to disrupt a growing relationship between Laurel and a man she

regards as "abnormal." This leads to Dixon nearly killing a young student, an event triggered not only by PTSD but also by his feelings of betrayal. By the time he apologizes, it is too late and it is notable that Brub and Sylvia are not invited to his engagement party where he finally begins to erupt into violence.

The call clearing Dixon of Mildred's murder arrives too late. Yet even after Kesler has confessed following a failed suicide attempt at the hospital, Lochner still does not believe this new evidence but muses to himself, "I wonder." He still regards Dixon as guilty telling Brub, "Don't let one right guess go to your head." He resembles an FBI chief wanting a high statistical body count of suspects. The implication is clear: although Lochner has failed to get a conviction in this case he will search for others like a diligent Red-baiting McCarthyite searching for more internal enemies.

Ray often referred to the ending of *In a Lonely Place* according to a personal level of interpretation.

"In *In a Lonely Place* at the ending of the film you do not know whether the man is going to go out, get drunk, have an accident in his car or whether he is going to go to a psychiatrist for help. And that's the way it should be; either one of the two things could happen to him because now the pressure is off, but now there's an internal pressure. He has a problem about himself."²⁰

Dixon certainly does have a problem about himself that going to a HUAC informant psychiatrist can never resolve. Instead, as Robin Wood concluded in his analysis of a later Ray film, *Bigger than Life*, Dixon really has to recognize that his problems are not just individual ones but ones motivated by external social forces he may not initially understand. He has to see the broader picture and come to terms with it. Wood's concluding sentences have more than coincidental relevance to this earlier film. "BIGGER THAN LIFE is among the cinema's most intelligent and searching statements about man-in-society. Its message (in so far as a complex work of art can be said to offer one) is not "Be satisfied with what you've got," but *Work with what you've got*, empirically and realistically. And know yourself."²¹

Ray struggled with this throughout his career. Deep down, he recognized the malignant influence of social forces that made him (and others) a stranger in a hostile world. *In a Lonely Place* may be read as a film about the destruction of a romantic relationship but it is much more than this. It is a film emerging from the heart of the blacklist revealing how potentials for positive relationships can be easily destroyed internally and externally. In this sense, it is both a personal work with relevant political overtones extending into the present day.²²

Notes

- 1 Gibbs, John, and Douglas Pye, *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2005.
- 2 Patrick McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray: The Glorious Failure of an American Director*. New York: Harper Collins, 2011, p. 185.
- 3 McGilligan, 198. Despite his belief that Ray testified McGilligan (p.210) admits that no documentary evidence exists confirming this. It is far more likely that Howard Hughes saved Ray from the blacklist for services rendered faithfully on pointless chores as Bernard Eisenschitz suggests. See *Nicholas Ray: An American Journey*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 167.
- 4 See Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir".





In a Lonely Place

Film Noir Reader. Eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini. New York: Limelight, 1996, p.74.

5 Op. cit. p.72.

6 Op. cit. p. 71.

7 George Turner, "Heart of Darkness."

<http://www.theasc.com/magazine/jul98/heart/title.htm>.

8 Place and Peterson, p.73.

9 Victor Perkins, "In a Lonely Place," *The Book of Film Noir*. Ed. Ian Cameron. New York: Continuum, 1993, 228-229.

10 See Tony Williams, "The Big Knife." *The Encyclopedia of Stage Plays into Film*. Eds. John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh. New York: Facts on File, Inc. 2001, p. 32.

11 Perkins, op. cit. p.224.

12 See Joseph McBride, *Writing in Pictures: Screenwriting Made (Mostly) Painless*. New York, Vintage Books, 2012, pp. 134-139.

13 This aspect was noted in an earlier study of the influence of the blacklist on this film. See James W. Palmer, "In a Lonely Place: Paranoia in the Dream Factory." *Literature Film Quarterly*. 13.3 (1985): 200-207. Michael Donaghe also discerns the historical context of the blacklist era influencing the film but concludes by emphasizing its autobiographical elements. "Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place*: From Thriller to Autobiographical Film Noir." *Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Conference on Film*. Kent State University, 1987, 97-102.

14 Turner, op. cit. Dana Polan regards Lochner as just a cop doing his job and does not note parallels between FBI surveillance techniques in the Cold War and the Captain's intrusive snooping into the personal lives of Dixon and Laurel. See Polan, *In a Lonely Place*. London: BFI Publishing, 1993, p. 36.

15 See Jean Rouverol, *Refugees from Hollywood: A Journal of the Blacklist Years*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000; Rebecca M. Schreiber, *Cold War Exiles in Mexico: U.S. Dissidents and the Culture of Critical Resistance*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2008.

16 See Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names*. London: John Calder, 1981, pp. 128-143.

17 This equation was actually made by Dies Committee Representative Joseph Starnes when interrogating Federal Theatre Director Hallie Flanagan in a Washington D.C. hearing during the 1930s foreshadowing the later anti-

intellectual pronouncements of Republican Tea Party candidates. "Though Starnes inadvertently made a laughingstock of himself and HUAC, he did succeed in raising into high relief the unease felt by his fellow conservatives about the passion for social change that drama can, and often does, arouse." Tim Robbins, *Cradle will Rock: The Movie and the Moment*. New York: Newmarket Press, 2000, p. 105.

18 For relevant examples involving the investigation of those interested in foreign music, taboo novels such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Howard Fast's *Citizen Tom Paine*, and various instances of book burnings paralleling those conducted under the Nazi regime, see Cedric Belgrave, *The American Inquisition 1945-1960: A Profile of the "McCarthy Era"*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989, pp.72, 76, 226. One official report concerning the attitude of security officers who investigated suspect civil service employees reveals the era's anti-intellectualism. "They are biased against intellectuals and anyone who reads a book." See David Caute, *The Great Fear*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978, p. 271. Other activities rendered suspicious during this time were vegetarianism, playing a recording of Marc Blitzstein's radical opera *The Cradle will Rock* first performed as a Federal Theatre project organized by Orson Welles and John Houseman in 1937, reading the "wrong books" and attending the Stanley Theatre in the East Coast that screened Soviet and foreign films. See Caute, pp. 76, 282, 282, 393 who also notes that "book burnings" (pp. 188, 226) reminiscent of those undertaken in Nazi Germany were quite common as were a high number of broken families and relationships due to the blacklist (p. 150).

19 See Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *A Very Dangerous Citizen: Abraham Polonsky and the Hollywood Left*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, p.108; Jerome Lawrence, *Actor: The Life and Times of Paul Muni*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1964, p. 295.

20 "Interview with Nicholas Ray", *Movie 9* (May 1963): 16.

21 Robin Wood, "Bigger than Life," *Film Comment* (September/October 1972): 61.

22 See also the comments of Geoff Andrew, *The Films of Nicholas Ray: The Poet of Nightfall*. London: BFI Publishing, 2004, pp. 52, 171. The last page also pertinently relates the film to our post 9/11 era. Note also the concluding comments in Reynold Humphries, *Hollywood's Blacklists: A Political and Cultural History*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008, pp. 159-163.

Marriage

In a Lonely Place

By ROBERT ALPERT

Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950) is a critical favorite.¹ It stars Humphrey Bogart, in what one critic has observed is his last, great movie,² and Gloria Grahame, who at the time was, unbeknownst to others associated with the movie, separating from Ray with whom she was then married.³ This highly romantic movie tells of how two people meet, fall passionately in love but come to distrust one another so that by the final shot each is again alone. Bogart, who plays the screenwriter Dixon ("Dix") Steele, writes the epitaph for the movie in the oft-quoted dialogue he creates for the screenplay at the center of the movie: "I was born when she kissed me. I died when she left me. I lived a few weeks while she loved me." Saying good-bye to Dix, Grahame, who plays the unsuccessful actress Laurel Grey, speaks to herself the movie's last line, "I lived a few weeks while you loved me." While classified by some as film noir,⁴ the movie is more readily understood as a melodrama, more akin to Douglas Sirk's *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956) than to Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944).

At its heart is a disbelief in the sufficiency of romantic love to prevail in the face of social, marital conventions. Those post-World War II conventions required that the couplings of men and women be founded not on love but on a commercial exchange seemingly benefiting both and resulting in marriages of comfort and convenience rather than genuine satisfactions and a transcendence of one's lonely state. Mid-way through the movie Dix and Laurel are wholly in love with one another, and Dix, in particular, is at peace with his Hollywood career, writing non-stop throughout the night a script based on—but which does not adhere to—the plot of a popular, trashy novel. It is at that moment that Dix's thespian friend, Charlie Waterman (Robert Warwick), a washed up actor from the silent era, quotes from Shakespeare's Sonnet 29.⁵ That sonnet tells of a man, likely an artist, who is "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes". In that respect he is like Dix, who has not had a commercial success, because he refuses to work on something he does not like and thereby become a "popcorn salesman". A social failure, Shakespeare's artist is "all alone", and in that respect, too, is similar to Dix, who lives alone and is known to let his phone ring unanswered. Shakespeare offers, however, his artist the redemption of great love: "Happily I think on thee, and then my state, like to the lark at break of day arising... For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings. That then I scorn to change my state with kings." Ray makes explicit the connection to Dix and Laurel when, as Dix falls asleep at "break of day" following his

night of non-stop writing, Laurel repeats the Shakespearean line "that then I scorn to change my state with kings".

Ray also makes explicit, however, that the transcendent state of such Shakespearean love is not possible in his contemporary world. Ray identifies Dix's lonely state in the opening shot. As the credits roll, we see in a car mirror a pair of disembodied eyes floating against a backscreen shot of the street down which the driver makes his way. The name "Humphrey Bogart" momentarily appears over those eyes, identifying the actor with his character, Dix Steele. The driver stops at a red light, pulling next to another car whose occupants are an attractive, young woman and a portly, older man. The woman banters with Dix, asking whether he remembers her, since he wrote her last picture at Columbia. "Oh, I make it a point to never see the pictures I write," he replies, highlighting his distaste for his screenwriting career. That casual exchange, however, provokes a jealous rage in the man, who insists that Dix stop "bothering" his wife. "You shouldn't have done it, honey, no matter how much money that pig's got," Dix replies, and then notches up still further the husband's threat that they "pull over to the curb" by replying, "What's the matter with right here?" More "civilized" than Dix, the husband drives off, leaving Dix standing alone in the street, his car door open. *In a Lonely Place* consists of a series of such encounters by Dix with married or engaged couples. In contrast to the redemption offered by Shakespeare and notwithstanding Dix's refusal to conform to the social conventions of marriage in which love plays little or no part, Dix finds himself, together with Laurel, trapped by those conventions—both as enacted by those around them as well as unwittingly played out by themselves.

The unraveling of their relationship begins even as Dix and Laurel first meet one another. Dix is introduced to Mildred Atkinson (Martha Stewart), a hatcheck girl at Paul's Restaurant, during the next scene. While never seen together with Henry Kesler (Jack Reynolds), Mildred is deeply involved with him, a "nice and substantial" man who lives with his parents and eats pie with cheese before going to bed, i.e. conforms to the clichéd, social norms. In contrast, as a hatcheck girl, Mildred is from a lower and more questionable social standing. Thus, like the couple Dix encountered in the film's opening scene, theirs, too, will be a marriage of mutual convenience. That Mildred accepts, albeit with supposed hesitation, Dix's offer to read to him at his apartment the trashy novel for which Dix has been asked to write the screenplay and that she does so by breaking



her date with Kesler—"I can see Henry anytime," she later comments—suggests the convenience which motivates her likely marriage to Kesler. That she later readily accepts Dix's explanation for why he has changed into his silk bathrobe and slippers—after all, as she has acknowledged, he makes her feel important—and that she eventually makes a pass at Dix, asking whether he is going steady with anyone, makes clear that she will marry for convenience with its mutually attendant benefits. Dix, in turn, rejects her pass at him because of the very banality with which she enjoys the "epic" novel she summarizes for him, and his evening with Mildred enables him to meet Laurel, albeit only briefly and in passing. Ironically, however, his evening with Mildred also results in Mildred's brutal murder later that same night, in turn, setting in motion events which will subvert Dix's unconventional attraction to and genuine love for Laurel.

Kesler, Mildred's boyfriend, and Dix meet only once—appropriately enough at the police station. Kesler is socially conventional so that the police view him as less of a murder suspect than the unconventional Dix. Dix speculates, however, that as between the two of them Kesler has the stronger motivation for murdering Mildred, namely jealousy. Kesler comments in reply that Dix has "quite an imagination" from writing movies, and Dix responds that Kesler has "quite a grip" from counting money, reminding us of Dix's earlier re-imagining of Kesler's "vice-like" grip which murdered Mildred. Business, money and death are for Ray all variations of the same social coinage. In contrast, Dix possesses in abundance not money but an imagination, as many characters acknowledge. That coinage, however, is not socially acceptable but is instead potentially dangerous. When Mildred describes Kesler as "nice and substantial" and that she "can see Henry anytime," Dix readily intuites that "in other words, you don't love him." Mildred accuses Dix of being a mind reader, and Dix acknowledges that "most writers like to think they are." Dix's imagination, that is, his ability to see and think beyond the socially conventional, is socially dan-

gerous insofar as it enables him to perceive that which others wish to remain unseen in order that they might collectively continue to go about their business.

It is another couple, however, Detective Sgt. Brub Nicolai (Frank Lovejoy), who served under Dix during the war and as such should best understand Dix, and Brub's wife, Sylvia Nicolai (Jeff Donnell), who inflict the greater injury upon Dix and Laurel. The Nicolais represent the conventional, happily married couple. Dix has avoided returning Brub's call for over a year, and it is surely no coincidence that they see one another again for the first time when Brub shows up unannounced at Dix's apartment at Sam the morning after Mildred's murder. Ray warns us immediately about Brub and Sylvia when Dix tells Brub half-jokingly to "get out of here", and Brub responds by asking whether that was an order and commenting: "You make me homesick for some of the worst years of our lives."

In a Lonely Place is Ray's response to the more conventional—and Academy award-winning—*The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) in which each of the three returning war veterans becomes reintegrated into the norm of everyday life (including in one case, government disability payments) and enjoys the rewards of a conventional marriage of home and family. In contrast to Dix who lives alone and has not had a commercially successful script since before the war, Brub is now a happily married and gainfully employed veteran. In response to Dix's query about how Brub came to be married, Brub informs Dix that Sylvia "had a couple of bucks to spare", adding as an afterthought "besides I liked her". The marriage of Brub and Sylvia mirrors the relationship between Mildred and Kesler, though with a reversal of the roles. Brub is the hunk from the lower class while Sylvia is the educated, moneyed spouse. That Brub can so readily reenact with Sylvia Kesler's strangling of Mildred at the imaginative evocation of the murder scene by Dix—"You get to a lonely place in the road, and you begin to squeeze...It's wonderful to feel her throat crush under your arm"—makes explicit that the two couples mirror one another.

While Kesler's murder of Mildred initiates the police investigation, it is Brub and Sylvia who directly participate in the destruction of the love affair between Dix and Laurel. Brub begins the process by his pre-meditated invitation to Dix for dinner at Brub's house at the prompting of Brub's superior, Capt. Lochner (Carl Benton Reid). While observing to Sylvia after dinner that Dix's mind is "superior" so that he has learned more from Dix's imaginative reenactment of the murder than all of the photographs and other conventional tools of the police trade, Brub nevertheless betrays Dix's trust and reports Dix's reenactment back to Lochner. When Lochner, in turn, betrays Brub's trust by disclosing to Laurel that reenactment, Brub's only response is a passive acceptance that Lochner knows what he's doing. In an obvious contrast to his perception of himself, Brub acknowledges to Sylvia that Dix is "exciting". Nevertheless, he exhibits none of that excitement in his own life and instead follows Lochner's orders just as he apparently did with those of his commanding officer Dix during the war. Dix is now, however, the enemy.

Sylvia expresses what makes Dix the enemy in the very act of explaining why she remains attracted to and hence married Brub. Calling upon her knowledge from a college class in abnormal psychology, she tells her husband in one of the more poignant moments in the film how glad she is that Brub is "not a genius" and that she likes him the way he is—"attractive and average"—even as she reflects upon how there's something "not normal" or wrong with Dix. Brub and Sylvia are then momentarily silent, each self-consciously reflecting upon the implications of what Sylvia has said. Sylvia barely kisses Brub and enters their home alone, with Brub remaining outside alone. Of course, others make similar observations about Dix, though judging his abnormal behavior differently. Mel (Art Smith), Dix's agent, makes the most impassioned speech about what's "wrong" with Dix: "You knew he was dynamite—he has to explode sometimes! Years ago I tried to make him go and see a psychiatrist. I thought he'd kill me!...He's Dix Steele. And if you want him, you've gotta take it all, the good with the bad..." Sylvia, however, rejects those extremes in behavior, because she is satisfied with her suburban home, which on a clear day offers a view of Catalina. Dix is "exciting", because he is not "normal" and hence represents a rejection of her conventional life. Thus, at the nighttime picnic she furthers the sundering of Dix and Laurel's relationship by her supposed "Freudian slip". She discloses to Dix that Laurel has, unbeknownst to Dix, met again with Lochner, thereby setting off Dix's rage in full view for Laurel to see and come to fear. When Laurel visits Sylvia the next morning at the Nicolai home to seek comforting advice from Sylvia given Laurel's now apparent fear of Dix's behavior, Sylvia administers the coup de grace. While truthfully expressing to Laurel one moment that Dix "is very much in love with you," the next moment she proposes that Laurel go away for a while from Dix given Laurel's anxiety about Dix's emotional instability.

For Ray society protects itself by inevitably punishing those who refuse to conform to the conventional. Those such as the Nicolais justify their lack of excitement and genuine passion either by compelling others such as Dix and Laurel to conform or by ostracizing (and often destroying) them. Laurel herself previously sought to escape and will be punished for that effort. Her backstory consists of a prior, socially acceptable coupling from which she ran away. An "actress", whose only continuing connection with the movie industry has been Martha (Ruth

Gillette), a masseuse, Laurel is linked socially with a Mr. Baker, the "real estate Baker" as Mel terms him. Having apparently had a loveless affair with him, she declined his offer of marriage, notwithstanding his money. Baker represents the conventionally acceptable marriage, and Martha repeatedly reminds Laurel of its benefits. Cautioning Laurel against being "nursemaid, sweetheart, cook and secretary" to Dix, she reminds Laurel that she needs to think of herself and of her need for security, that she should discard Dix so that she can be up on "Miller Drive", and that Baker is "a good business man who wants to get married". She succinctly summarizes what is at stake: "Remember, angel, in the beginning was the land. Motion pictures came later." Money comes first; the world conjured up by imagination is, at best, a luxury. Marriage is a contractual undertaking; love is socially useless.

It is in the context of this backstory that Laurel is initially hesitant to become involved with Dix, though fully understanding what Dix represents. That she comments at the police station that "she likes his face"—and consequently makes up an alibi for him on the night of Mildred's murder—expresses her attraction to character over conventional good looks or money. Indeed, she expresses no interest in Dix's supposed celebrityhood. When Dix later looks at himself in the mirror and asks "how could anyone like a face like mine," displaying the tired, sagging flesh of an aging face, the line between Dix Steele, the movie character, and Humphrey Bogart, the movie actor, disappears. Lacking the conventional, Hollywood appearance, it is Bogart's depth of character—the lack of separation between role and actor and the honesty which that demands—which attracts Laurel. Dix likewise comments to Mel in reviewing the casting directory that Laurel has a "wonderful face". Both speak their mind and know what they like. They will have "an affair", but only because they love one another. At that daybreak moment when Dix and Laurel are most in love, Laurel will teasingly tell Dix that she does not love him but rather "it's your money I'm after." Not surprisingly, in contrast, Capt. Lochner, the voice of conventional authority, that same morning expresses incomprehension at why Laurel is not, in fact, being paid for her "work" for Dix—in the same way that he earlier questioned Dix's motive for having paid a large sum of money to Mildred for Mildred's "work". Lacking imagination, Lochner can see only the conventional, marital *quid pro quo* of sex and money.

Yet notwithstanding her rejection of the conventional, Laurel remains attracted to its supposed benefits, which Dix's love renders impossible. As Laurel acknowledges to Sylvia, Dix would be no different even if he were not an artist. Their love, which is premised upon the unconventional, necessarily imbues their affair with ambiguity and risk. In response to Laurel's consent to their affair, Dix speaks eloquently. "I've been looking for someone a long time...I didn't know her name or where she lived—I'd never seen her before...Now I know your name, where you live, and how you look." Yet Dix acknowledges in that most romantic declaration of love that such love comes at a price: "A girl [Mildred] was killed, and because of that, I found what I was looking for." Dix kisses Laurel passionately as a summation of his romantic declaration. Yet even his kiss is qualified by the ambiguity of his gesture. His hands are upon Laurel's throat as he draws her ever closer to him.

For all of her desire to embrace and reciprocate Dix's love, Laurel fears that ambiguity and uncertainty which it demands. Tellingly, it is Laurel's sarcastic retort to Lochner at her second interrogation—that she will invite Lochner to the wedding if

she marries Dix—that later results in Sylvia’s “Freudian slip” at the picnic and Dix’s resulting rage at Laurel’s deception. Following Dix’s manifestation of his rage by assaulting a UCLA football student, Dix reenacts yet again the murder of Mildred when Dix gently places his arm around Laurel’s neck. Laurel has now, however, begun to believe that Dix has murdered Mildred. When Dix asks Laurel to repeat his scripted dialogue, significantly Laurel fails to speak the last line—“I lived a few weeks while she love me.” Instead, choosing the next day to visit Sylvia at her home, Laurel confesses that “this is what I’d like to have some day”, a “small cozy home near the ocean”, and the domesticity which accompanies such normalcy. She also now observes for the first time that “there is something strange about” Dix. In fact, Dix is the antithesis of normalcy, at their breakfast together straightening the normally curved grapefruit knife even as he tells Laurel that this scene is about “something else”. While Laurel acknowledges how much she loved the love scene which Dix has written for his screenplay, in “real life” she fears the consequences demanded by such love. The “something else” enacted at this particular scene, which Dix identifies as their love, is, in fact, a disintegration of that love.

Nor is Dix himself immune from the pressures of conventional marriage represented by those around him. On the one hand, he exhibits his contempt for the conventional marriage by his extra-marital affairs with other women and his observation during the nighttime picnic that married women are too well versed in the laws of community property as well as the number of minks needed to make a coat. On the other hand, as his relationship with Laurel increasingly deteriorates, he seeks refuge in a hurried afternoon to purchase with Laurel an engagement ring and a home in substitution for the social transiency represented by separate apartments. Indeed, he hastens the deterioration by his insistence that he and Laurel be married that very day. Even Mel, who has known Dix the longest, plays his part in confusing the illusion of happiness offered by a conventional marriage for love. “We’ll be such a happy family,” he exclaims to Laurel before realizing that Laurel’s fear has already won. He then compounds his mistake by misleading Laurel into believing that if Dix achieves commercial success, then nothing else matters, thereby justifying his theft, with Laurel’s consent, of Dix’s completed screenplay. Praised by all, it ironically does not follow the narrative of the clichéd novel which had initially so enraged Dix. Dix has achieved commercial success as a result of his refusal as an artist to conform; he has, however, failed to achieve romantic love, because his commercial success has not lessened his refusal to conform to the demands of social success. Symbolically, the love affair between Dix and Laurel ends as it began. While her fear leads her to confess that she cannot live with a “maniac”, it is that manic state that leads him to confess that he cannot live without her. He “cannot let her go”, and his hands are once again upon her throat. It is only the ringing of the telephone which brings Dix to his “senses”.

While it is Brub on the phone, it is Capt. Lochner who offers an ineffective apology to Laurel for the mistake in suspecting Dix as Mildred’s murderer. Lochner early in the movie observes that “killing has a fascination” for Dix, but the irony is that killing for Lochner possesses an equal fascination. The walls of his office are covered with photographs of victims, and he unhesitatingly shows Dix the photographs of Mildred’s murdered body and later shows Laurel the photographs of “normal looking” men whom he identifies as “maniacs” who have killed

others. Capt. Lochner represents “civilized” society’s accepted form of brutality, which rejects the unconventional, including its ambiguities and uncertainties, and acts on its behalf to kill off the love between and Dix and Laurel.

Lochner’s belated, matter-of-fact apology is evocative of Dix’s own apologies—the dozen white roses to Mildred for his failure to act the part of a “gentleman”, the \$300 check to the UCLA student from “Mr. Squirrel”, and the offer of a new tie to Mel for Dix’s striking of Mel as events irretrievably unravel. The difference is that Dix tenders his apologies in a tone both light-hearted and sincere so that, for example, Laurel acknowledges to Sylvia how Dix is so sweet and gentle, bearing an armful of gifts, in the mornings after. In contrast, after defensively expressing to Brub his mistaken suspicions about Dix, Lochner coldly delivers his apology. He acts more the executioner than one regretful for what he has wrought.

For Nicholas Ray romantic love is necessarily passionate and thereby irrational; moderation and the conventional play no part. Keechie (Cathy O’Donnell) and Bowie (Farley Granger) in *They Live by Night* (1948) marry on an impulse. Vienna (Joan Crawford) in *Johnny Guitar* (1954) chooses Johnny Logan (Sterling Hayden) for the very reason that he is “gun crazy”, possessing a genuine passion for her not extinguished after so many years. And Jane Brand (Ruth Roman) in *Bitter Victory* (1957) chooses Captain Leith (Richard Burton) over Major Brand (Curd Jurgens), because Leith, a disillusioned idealist, is prepared to risk all in the face of his disgust for the conventional. Ray’s idealized love entails risk, and his characters often lose in the process of seeking to achieve such love. In *In a Lonely Place* the love of Dix and Laurel is killed off by the couples around them who supposedly “mean well” but who are, in fact, invested in the conventions of “normalcy”, stability, home and its material possessions. They have compromised their passions and love for the sake of security, including their well-paying, if unimaginative jobs and their homes with handmade curtains and a clear view of other such homes. For his refusal to become a “popcorn salesman” and for her refusal to live on Miller Drive, Dix and Laurel are suitably punished. Both are relegated at film’s end to “a lonely place”, a place no different than that enjoyed by all of the film’s couples.

Notes

- 1 A partial list of articles on *In a Lonely Place* can be found in “Nicholas Ray: A Bibliography of Materials in the UC Berkeley Library.” www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/nickray.html#lonely, which was retrieved on March 3, 2012.
- 2 James Harvey, *Movie Love in the Fifties*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2001), 150.
- 3 Ironically, Ray fought to have his wife Gloria Graham, rather than Ginger Rogers, star in the movie. Bernard Eisenschitz, *Nicholas Ray: An American Journey*, trans. Tom Milne (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 134. As filming of the movie progressed, however, Ray and Graham’s marriage deteriorated to the point where they eventually separated; Ray told no one of their separation. *Id.* 144.
- 4 Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, *Film Noir An Encyclopedia Reference to the American Style* (Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 1979), 144-46 (“a peculiar kind of film noir...”).
- 5 Shakespeare’s Sonnet 29 reads in full as follows:
When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possess’d,
Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate;
For thy sweet love remember’d such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Nobody's Vision

JIM JARMUSCH'S *DEAD MAN*

By GEORGE PORCARI

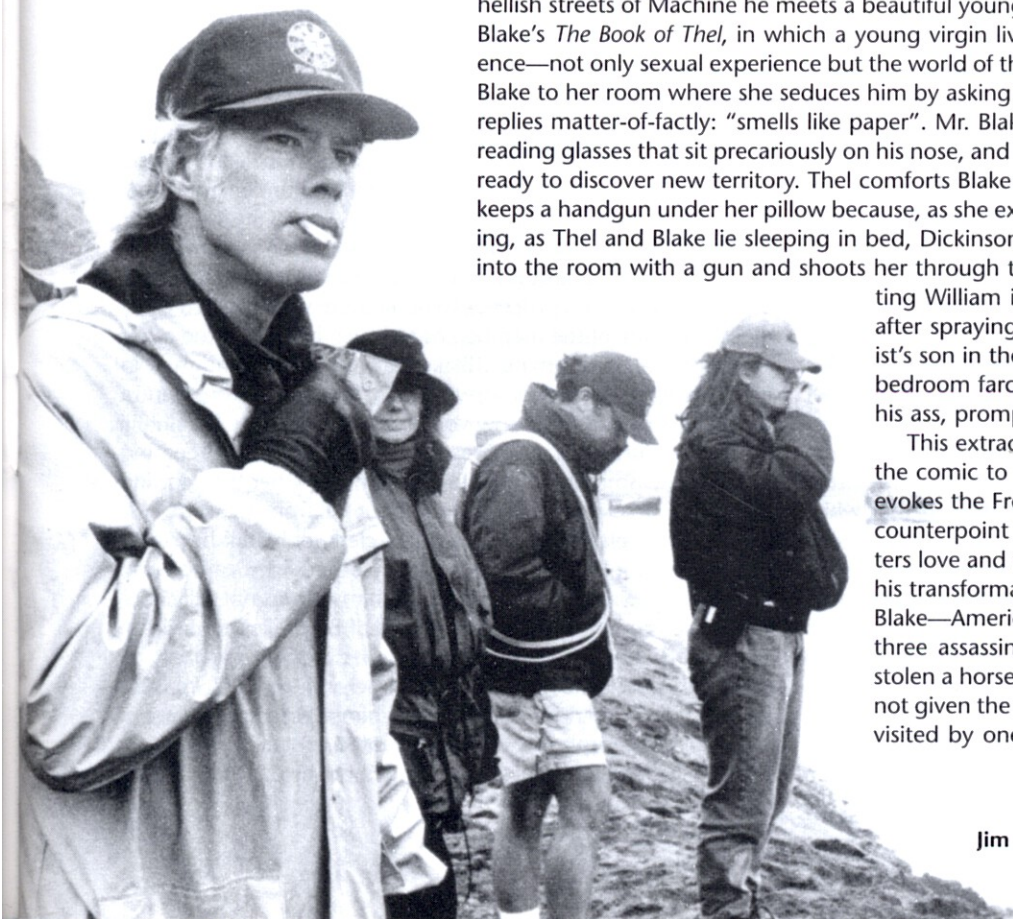
Man has no notion of moral fitness but from Education. Naturally he is only a natural organ subject to Sense.

—William Blake,
"There is No Natural Religion"

Dead Man, released in 1995, is a film with an original screenplay by its director Jim Jarmusch, the cinematography is by Robby Muller, and the soundtrack, consisting of improvisations on electric guitar is by Neil Young. Its central character is a clerk named William Blake played by Johnny Depp who comes west looking for a job in a town called Machine. Blake's west is seen first through the slats of a train as it travels west through the American landscape in brief tableaux that dissolve to black. We see trash, abandoned wagons, rusting machinery and carcasses left over from the westward expansion. Nature and culture are seen as tied together in an erratic, haphazard cycle of birth, struggle and death; our relation to time, to material things, and to their passing are all articulated in the glimpses of the American landscape we see from the train. The fades to black have an inevitable element of pathos built into their poetics—suggesting that the transient operations of nature and culture together are the fundamental aspects of human social life—such as it is. Blake's companions on the train come and go, getting progressively more "western", more destitute and more desperate as we reach Machine. When someone in the train shouts "buffalo!" and every man in the train—except for Blake—fires his rifle out the window, we know we have reached an absurd "west" undreamed of by Frederic Remington, Ansel Adams or John Ford. The onrush of impressions created by the rapid crowding of images from the window of a moving train create an essentially urban sensibility that is then brilliantly grafted to the mythology of the Western.

When Bill Blake arrives in Machine he discovers that the job he came for is taken; the man who informs him is the de-facto owner of the town, John Dickinson, played by Robert Mitchum—a veteran of conventional Hollywood westerns such as *River of No Return*. As Bill wonders around the hellish streets of Machine he meets a beautiful young woman named Thel. The name comes from Blake's *The Book of Thel*, in which a young virgin living in innocence enters the world of experience—not only sexual experience but the world of the senses—only to retreat in terror. Thel invites Blake to her room where she seduces him by asking him to smell her flowers (made of paper). He replies matter-of-factly: "smells like paper". Mr. Blake, as his city clothes which are too tight, his reading glasses that sit precariously on his nose, and his literal minded answer make clear, is a man ready to discover new territory. Thel comforts Blake in her small boarding room but tells him she keeps a handgun under her pillow because, as she explains sweetly, "this is America". In the morning, as Thel and Blake lie sleeping in bed, Dickinson's son who is one of Thel's boyfriends bursts into the room with a gun and shoots her through the heart. The bullet passes through Thel hitting William in the same spot. Blake takes Thel's gun and after spraying the room with bullets shoots the industrialist's son in the neck and kills him. Then in the manner of a bedroom farce he jumps out the window and, landing on his ass, promptly takes the first road out of Machine.

This extraordinary sequence shifting with bravado from the comic to the tragic, from the grotesque to the absurd evokes the French and German New Waves in its complex counterpoint of styles and emotional content. Bill encounters love and death on his first night in Machine beginning his transformation from Bill Blake—accountant—to William Blake—American poet. The industrialist Dickinson hires three assassins to kill Blake for having killed his son and stolen a horse—the girl's death is mentioned in passing but not given the importance accorded to the horse. Bill is then visited by one of the most wonderful characters to come



Jim Jarmusch



out of a work of American film, an Indian educated (by way of Mark Twain?) in England named Nobody played by Gary Farmer. In the only flashback in the film we see Nobody as a boy reciting Blake's poetry by memory to amused Europeans who treat Nobody as a curiosity, much as artists' models in ethnic costume or sharks in formaldehyde once amused (and still continue to amuse) the very rich. Once he is educated in the ways of white men the traditional Indians wish to have nothing more to do with him. Being too "Indian" to live with whites and too "white" to live with Indians he is caught between cultures, becoming, in a sense, a harbinger of the fate that would await generations of immigrants that came to America. His very language is a unique amalgam—which Blake at first describes as "Indian talk"—of the traditional poetics associated with the "Vision Quest" of Native American Indians and European poetry. Being neither fish nor fowl his name comes to be Nobody. Having committed William Blake's poetry to memory he helps the young man, despite the fact that he finds it strange that "William can not remember any of his poetry". When Nobody sees that Bill has been hit in the heart he presses grass and mud into the wound to seal it. From then on Bill Blake is essentially a dead man. "Did you kill the man who killed you?" asks Nobody. "But I'm not dead" replies Blake. Nobody sees that it is indeed a sensitive poet who speaks, but is it really William Blake?

Nobody appears to be a man who has seen much and understood that white men bring with them "Machine"—that is a technology that makes life a hell on earth but that white men embrace because they feel it protects them from what they do not understand: Nature. Blake the British mystic embraced what he did not know—even what he feared—because he saw God manifested precisely there. Birth, death and the varieties of emotions and sense experiences in-between were, for Blake, a mysterious physical force emerging from a totality that could never be understood by men—to try would not only be futile but vane and ultimately self-destructive. American writers as different as Walt Whitman, Henry Miller,

Allen Ginsburg, Joan Didion and Norman Mailer have all written against the American directive to sanitize nature, to control it, and ultimately perhaps to supplant it. Death to the American puritan sensibility becomes an intolerable force that like Nature itself must be "conquered". Nature from this point of view is a filthy disgusting mess that needs Man to shape it into something "reasonable" and "rational"; our natural state is merely a stop on the road to some unspecified perfectibility, which is where technology comes in. For most Americans their Protestant Christian faith insists that man is not a part of Nature—but a being separate from Nature created in the image of a God. *Dead Man* offers an alternative vision in which the hero learns from European art (Blake's poetry) and from Native American culture (the Vision Quest) to navigate a new and more holistic approach to death and therefore to life, bringing with it an intuitive understanding of our animal and divine nature in which man belongs to Nature in a fundamental way that is both physical and spiritual.

Nobody insists that William confront an encampment of white men sitting around a fire, as if wishing to test Blake's authenticity. William proceeds to greet them with strained casualness, but one of the men begins to touch his hair as the other screams: "this one's mine". Blake surprisingly kills the men in combat. Nobody comes forward and tells him: "You were a poet and a painter, and now you are a killer of white men". Bill Blake is an innocent who presumably had no goal in coming out west (as so many others then and now) other than to find a job. Yet there is something fake about Bill from the start. It is as if he were playing at the part of a clerk, only half heartedly resigned to the role, and like so many others who came west, had been inspired by reasons that he himself was not fully conscious of. The film charts the progress of Bill Blake into William Blake as he begins to see with the eyes of a poet—albeit an American poet who adapts to his time and place by making poetry with a gun. Ironically Bill Blake himself seems unaware of his own metamorphosis, while the wanted posters that precede him on his voyage chart the changes on his face, in Blake's

terms, from Innocence to Experience. When Bill Blake's glasses are shattered Nobody suggests that he might no longer need them, implying that Blake had up until then not seen the world clearly. With the guidance of Nobody—who in a sense becomes the spiritual guide of his favorite poet—Bill becomes someone who has, again in Blake's terms, glimpsed something beyond the physical world, and moved to a place where he can see the more fundamental visionary truth that underlies all matter. The film follows this "vision quest" onwards to a Blakean vision of what that visionary truth might look like in cinematic terms.

William Blake speaks to a deputy before he shoots him dead: "My name is William Blake—this is my poetry". Standing over the corpse of the man he has just killed he proceeds to quote from Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*—that he learned from Nobody—"Some are Born to sweet delight/Some are Born to Endless night". We then see Dickinson hire three unlikely bounty hunters who are enthusiastically introduced as "the finest killers of men and Indians in this half of the world". This is an inspired absurdist re-creation of the three wise men: instead of finding the Messiah who is to be re-born after death, they must find William Blake, a man already dead, and kill him. They are: "The Kid" a black teenager; Conway Twill a middle-aged talker; and Cole Wilson the proverbial silent gunslinger dressed in black. Twill explains to the skeptical Kid—without a trace of irony: "Cole fucked his parents and then ate them! Why he ain't got a Goddamn conscience!" Twill's unlikely cannibal story is made more probable after Cole kills both his partners by shooting them in the back—and then proceeds to eat the unfortunate Twill by campfire, as we see Cole stripping the meat off a human forearm with his teeth. The cannibal (the consumer to use Blake's term) figures prominently in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as the representative of the lower bodily element. In opposition to transcendence he engorges himself without thinking or feeling. For Blake humans possessed both the spiritual and the consumer, who struggled for power within every individual.

Nobody and Bill find a trading post officiated by a cautious Christian missionary. He is serviceable to Blake but refuses to sell anything to Nobody because he is an Indian. We are made aware of the catastrophic violence done to the Native American population by white men not through conventional confrontations as in John Ford's *Cheyenne Autumn* but through inference: The casual way that Nobody mentions the epidemic of smallpox carried by blankets sold (knowingly) by white traders; the ruined villages depleted and dying that we see in glances as Nobody and Bill pass through the American landscape; yet the most telling effect of white men on Indians is Nobody himself—his ironic humor, his hatred subordinated to an almost Buddhist detachment, understanding and acceptance. Such humor could come only after the suffering of many generations, a suffering to exhaustion, to the renunciation of suffering itself because it is inadequate to the realities that have been lived through—a quiet place in which there are no more reasons to give or tears to shed. Jewish humor comes from a similar place.

Blake realizes that because of the wanted posters on the trading post the Christian missionary has recognized him and he cavalierly takes one of the posters, hands it to him, and offers to autograph it. The missionary pulls out a gun from behind the counter and Blake stabs him through the hand with the pen and shoots him dead. Bill uses the pen—Blake's weapon of choice—with such street smarts that we see again that it is truly a different person than the one that walked into Machine innocently looking for a clerk's job. Nobody proceeds to quote Blake

to the dead missionary: "The Vision of Christ that thou dost see/Is my Visions greatest enemy." This damning criticism by William Blake is one of many attacks by him on the repeated attempts by organized religion to use "reason" in the form of moralizing sermons, stories and paintings to "illustrate" the Passion and to bring people—in the greatest numbers possible—into a passive acceptance of Christianity. For someone like Blake the idea that you should follow rules established by an institution as a means to reach God—or the divine—was absurd. The way to spiritual knowledge was not through passive acceptance of orthodoxy and the words and images made by those institutions; the way to the divine must be a creative act—it is literally made through *passionate action*. For Blake there is no other way to discover your own soul and understand its relation to infinity. In short his was an existential relation to the divine and like other poets before him (Villon) and after him (Rimbaud) was bound to get into trouble with authority—so it is with the American William Blake.

Nobody and Blake reach their destination: a reservation near the Canadian border that has freshly made totem poles and a craftsman who understands perfectly the sort of canoe Bill needs to reach across "the mirror of waters". As Bill is placed horizontally on the canoe his energy begins to fade and Nobody appropriately gives him the last push out to sea. At that point we see through Blake's point-of view Cole Wilson sneak up behind Nobody and shoot him; Nobody then turns and shoots Cole. The Mystic and the Cannibal upon meeting, destroy each other—exactly as Blake described it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. This sequence is brilliantly shot in pantomime mimicking the theatrical expressiveness of silent films. The shot also suggest that for Bill this earthly struggle is fading and becoming more schematic. As we get further and further away from the shore as Blake is barely able to see above the rim of the canoe he no longer has the strength to hold up his head and he looks up at the sky. The last shot in the film combines the death of its protagonist with a pan of the ocean at sunset. The exact moment of his death is not seen—it is left to the imagination and becomes imbued with a sense of the natural landscape—a landscape that owes much to the Hudson River school of painting—reminding us that this Blakean vision has been transformed by a decidedly American sensibility. Because of the dramatic use of light, the way it is shot using high contrast black and white, and the music accompanying the images the ocean becomes inevitably a symbol for the source of life, death and re-birth. The water is both a substance that we look at, that we see into, and that also reflects the sky—it is, as Nobody described it—a mirror. The incommensurability of these liquid spaces expresses the impossibility of apprehending all with the eye or of controlling all with the intellect. The effect of floating on one's back looking up at the sky is to lose oneself in something that is larger and greater than the self. William Blake gives the impression of floating between the sea and the sky towards a metaphysical space. This state of being is impossible to describe in prose and that is why we have poetry, art and film. This is how the 18th century Londoner William Blake described it:

The Nature of Infinity is this: That every thing has its Own Vortex, and when once a traveler thro' Eternity Has pass'd that Vortex he perceives it roll backward behind His path, into a globe itself infolding like a sun Or like a moon, or like a universe of starry majesty.

To Experience *Song of Ceylon*

By DANIELLA GITLIN

There is something magical about the dance sequences of the 1934 documentary, *Song of Ceylon*. The dancers turn their feet mechanically to the left and then to the right, spasmodic yet somehow graceful in their movement: the viewer is entranced, moved, viscerally taken. The magic, though, doesn't lie in the fact that the images appearing on the screen so accurately resemble what we know as life, but in something else, something that distinguishes this film from the other two that it is grouped with as part of the E.M.B. Classics series entitled "The British Documentary Movement," Volume 1.¹

The series seems to keep its home mainly in libraries and film archives, but is by no means commercially distributed (though a very low-quality version can be streamed from YouTube). The two films that precede *Song of Ceylon* on the tape are *Drifters* (1929) and *Industrial Britain* (1933). Before watching the films, I'd naively assumed that John Grierson, who is praised on the jacket of the VHS tape, was wholly responsible for all three. The towering figure of John Grierson as the "father of documentary"² sometimes overshadows the role of his collaborators, the handful of people he worked with on and off for decades. Though Grierson did indeed produce all three films on the tape, he was the main director only for *Drifters*. Robert Flaherty was the principal director for *Industrial Britain* (with Grierson finishing up when Flaherty ran over his budget³), and Basil Wright directed *Song of Ceylon*. I found the imagery of the flying seagulls and laboring fisherman in *Drifters* seductive, and the insight into the worker's relationship to his craft and the vision of industry in *Industrial Britain* perceptive, but it was *Song of Ceylon* that really caught my eye. Surely, there was the exotic appeal of seeing people of a different culture on the screen—a welcome contrast to the footage of white British males that dominated the first two films—but my attraction to the film went much deeper than that. It was the combination of the move-

ment on the screen and the sound track that pulled me from the flow of the other admittedly—to take a descriptor Bill Nichols uses to describe Grierson's work in one of his jabs—more tedious films.⁴ When I reached the end of the film, I realized that Basil Wright was the director and the editor, and I wanted to know how this film had come about, and why the dance sequences had affected me the way they did.

The Maker

Basil Wright was twenty-two years old and making experimental films when Grierson asked him to join the effort at the Empire Marketing Board. Only nine years his senior, Grierson would be the authority of the two, again the father figure, with Wright as his son and protégé. Wright had a deep respect for his teacher, and found working with him "rewarding personally, psychologically, and rewarding in terms of work."⁵ As a forward to his little book, *The Use of the Film* (1948), Wright pens a letter to Grierson, beginning:

Dear John,

You have often urged me to write a book. Now I have done so, if only on a very small scale. I have not the least doubt that you will tear it to bits, and I for one shall not blame you, if only because I know we both agree that books about films somehow manage to leave out all the fun and affection which make the film-world one of the more pleasant (and crazier) areas of operation.

Wright prepares himself for an attack, which he almost seems to believe he deserves. The book is a mere sixty-seven pages, and it is hard to imagine what Grierson would have torn to bits, especially since, in the few places where Wright does venture at theorizing about film, his arguments generally work to follow



Grierson's suit, or to lightly unpack other filmmakers' approaches (like Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Eye*, for example). Wright does articulate fourteen uses of the film at the start of the book, but none of them are glaringly original or controversial. His tone throughout is far from forceful; he delivers his thoughts with a pale fraction of the conviction (which sometimes verges on aggression) that Grierson uses in his writing.

Wright was a humanitarian and a pacifist. In 1980, already in his seventies, Wright told an interviewer about his father who came home after serving as a major in World War I and "devoted the whole of the rest of his life to the promotion of peace."⁶ Wright goes on to say that he was raised in "a total anti-war, pro-League of Nations atmosphere," and the latter third of his book endorses a plan that would have enabled UNESCO to use the media for educational purposes throughout India and Africa.

The bulk of Wright's book is devoted to demystifying the economics surrounding the film industry in the 1930s and 40s, and exposing the amount of influence corporations and governments had on what was being produced. Wright describes 1920s Britain, the period that directly preceded the making of *Song of Ceylon*:

[I]t had become clear that Western democracy was in danger of collapse because its citizens did not know how to make it work. [...] The economic system of the great Victorian era was falling apart. The political system was in danger of complete collapse, not so much through threats of revolution as through electoral apathy. People had become bewildered because life had begun to move too fast for them.

This basic failure in democracy was a failure in education.⁷

Wright blames the state of affairs on poor education, claiming that citizens were taught "nothing related to people's everyday lives and problems." Instead, they were taught "knowledge for the sake of knowledge" but in a "limited, unimaginative" way. "Film was chosen, rather than any medium," Wright explains, "because the gift of sight is common to all men. Seeing is believing."⁸ Thus Wright and Grierson agreed that cinema, with its emphasis on the visual, was the best way to access an illiterate public: "[O]rdinary people are no fools. In the complexity of the modern world they may not be able to know everything

about everything all the time, but, as John Grierson puts it, 'they have an unerring sense of smell.'"⁹ Grierson's compliment, I'm sure, is well taken by some, but dehumanizing to my ear. Wright manages to wax romantic about "ordinary people" while passing the ugly words through Grierson's dummy lips.

Knowledge and Experience in Wright, Grierson, and Dewey

There seems to be a tendency in Grierson scholarship to avoid offending the father of documentary. Even in *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement* (1990), where author Ian Aitken makes a point in his Introduction of finally cutting through all the sugarcoating of the history of the documentary movement and telling it like it is, Grierson emerges a hero: "[A]lthough Grierson found himself in an intellectual context which was often dominated by conservative and anti-democratic ideologies, he consciously distanced himself from these ideologies, and associated himself with more liberal pragmatist and positivist ideologies."¹⁰ Aitken then adds, as though in apology:

However, he was significantly influenced by the fashionable belief that society must be governed and guided by elites, and this belief can be found in many of his writings, from the twenties to his final years. This belief had a formative influence in shaping his views on democracy, and on the role of the mass media within democratic societies.¹¹

Namely, Grierson's rather starkly anti-democratic position on "ordinary people"—that is, he might have had trouble agreeing that democracy is of the people and by the people—is softened by Aitken mentioning that it was a fashionable belief at the time. It's not that Grierson looked down on ordinary people, he was just a victim of his times.

What Grierson's and Wright's stances on the capacities of ordinary people *did* mean was that, if film was going to have a wide effect, it would have to take into account that its target audience was a kind of animalistic, instinctive, visually oriented mass. The focus would have to be on the *experience* of watching the film, on producing a reaction in the viewer. Here, pragmatism's effect on Grierson, and by extension on Wright, becomes relevant. Aitken went through Grierson's notes from his time at Chicago University in 1924-25 and found not only



that Grierson "had been familiar with the writings of Dewey, James, and other American pragmatist theorists," but that "he was particularly influenced by the pragmatist distinction between knowledge which did and did not lead to useful results."¹² This language takes the reader back to Wright's claim that Britain was failing to educate its public by teaching it "knowledge for the sake of knowledge."

Crucial to Dewey's pragmatism and Grierson's and Wright's theories of film is an understanding of knowledge as resting in the shade of experience. How can knowledge be on the same plane as experience, let alone trump it, if knowledge itself is a form of experience—an experience in thought? Grierson, Wright, and Dewey would all agree that without experience and attention to the historical world's specific problems and solutions (as opposed to, say, the quest for absolute truth), social improvement will always be kept at bay.

John Dewey's conceptions of experience are articulated clearly in *Art as Experience*, published the same year as *Song of Ceylon* was completed. In the opening paragraph to his section entitled "The Live Creature," Dewey writes: "Since the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience, the result is not favorable to understanding."¹³ He goes on:

While man is other than bird and beast, he shares basic vital functions with them and has to make the same basal adjustments if he is to continue the process of living. Having the same vital needs, man derives the means by which he breathes, moves, looks, and listens, the very brain with which he coordinates his senses and his movements, from his animal forbears.¹⁴

The experience of responding to a work of art is an engagement, again, with these animalistic senses, the ordinary person's sense of smell, as Grierson would have it. Dewey proclaims his stance perhaps most succinctly in *Democracy and Education* (1916): "An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance."¹⁵ In the early 1930s, as part of an essay for *Cinema Quarterly* entitled "First Principles of Documentary," Grierson wrote: "(1) We believe that the cinema's capacity for getting around, for observing and selecting from life itself, can be exploited in a new and vital art form."¹⁶ "Vital" is the word that came to mind when I watched *Song of*

Ceylon for the first time. It is a difficult word to use in a critical context, for what does it mean for something to be vital—to be literally, "of life"? And if that is the case, then am I not back where I started, now contradicting my first declaration about the power of the dance sequences not lying in their true-to-lifeness?

But there is a distinction to be made here between being "of life" and being "like life"—the first definition, of course, is significantly more flexible, while the second inevitably implies some sort of equivalence or at least representation. What I experienced as I watched the child dancers move half-way through the film, and then the adult dancers move in the last five minutes of the film, was the feeling that something had come over me, that I had engaged with the film in a bodily way, that it had provoked a marked experience in me. Dewey writes that experience in the "vital sense is defined by those situations and episodes that we spontaneously refer to as being 'real experiences'; those things of which we say in recalling them, 'that was an experience.'"¹⁷ He goes on to explain the way in which these types of experiences differ from the otherwise constant flow of experience that we creatures live on a daily basis. Dewey's use of the word "real" here to explain his idea to the average reader is instructive: when we say we had a "real" experience, do we mean it was real in its true-to-lifeness, in its resemblance to what we perceive as *reality*, or do we mean something different? I think Dewey's second example ("that was an experience") gives us the answer: we say the experience was "real" because we tend to equate reality with existence.

Dewey assumes that saying the experience was *real* and saying that it simply was offer the same signification. What I think he is actually talking about, and what Grierson and Wright aim to produce in the viewer (and succeeded, in my case), is a bodily experience. Dewey spends pages upon pages of his books trying to break down the body-mind dualism that privileged theory over practice. The legacy of the Enlightenment for Dewey was that "[p]ractice was not so much subordinated to knowledge as treated as a kind of tag-end or aftermath of knowledge."¹⁸ In her essay "Political Mimesis," Jane Gaines explicates the argument that anthropologist Michael Taussig makes in his book *Mimesis and Alterity*: "There are things the body 'knows' that the mind does not, [Taussig] would say. Still, our Enlightenment assumptions make us dubious."¹⁹ We are so automatically invested in rational knowledge that the prospect of a separate but equally significant knowledge tends to elude us.

This is not to say that the spectator is necessarily learning



anything by watching, say, a dance—one may simply be reacting involuntarily to the image on the screen. Providing some insight into this topic is Linda Williams, who explores the body's reactions to three genres of film (pornography, horror, and melodrama) in her piece "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." She begins the piece anecdotally: "When my seven-year-old son and I go to the movies, we often select from among categories of films that promise to be sensational to give our bodies an actual physical jolt."²⁰ While *Song of Ceylon* does not fall easily into any of the film genres mentioned above, it did provoke in me the kind of "involuntary mimicry"²¹ that fascinates Williams. But to be more precise, it was not that I wanted to get up and dance like the Ceylonese on the screen; I was moved by the moving image on the screen (and the sound), but I didn't want to mimic the dancers' exact movements with my own.

The power of the experience did depend on the image presented on the screen together with the sound, and it was only enhanced by the knowledge, which only documentary film can provide, that what I was watching *had actually happened*. As Jean-Louis Comolli writes in "Documentary Journey to the Land of the Head Shrinkers":

[T]he work of the cinematic scene is actually a prefiguration of the moment of absence, intensifying through it this moment of presence, so as to intensify, finally, the presence of bodies through the promise of their coming absence. The image of the actor's body, absent but represented, finds a response, and possibly a hidden correspondence, in the real body of the spectator.²²

What thrilled me even more was the knowledge that, while I was being moved by this imagery in 2009, the footage had been recorded in 1934. The vitality of the dancers' movements, though, eclipsed the temporal gap, and I felt as energized (if not less) by watching them as I might be were I to watch the same footage filmed today.

What further complicates the parallel between the "body genres" that Williams analyzes and *Song of Ceylon* is the next step she takes of questioning the degree of perversity inherent in watching the kinds of films that provoke a physical reaction in the viewer. In Williams' breakdown of her genres, the potential dangers of viewing pornography, horror, and melodrama are sadism, sadomasochism, and masochism, respectively.

Williams problematizes the very notion of perversion, though, questioning whether we should even condemn these forms of perversion (namely the viewing of these films). Maybe we ought to leave our guilty pleasures alone.

In her article, Williams focuses on "female body genres" and her questions circle around the objectification of women and the male gaze; applying a similar lens to *Song of Ceylon* yields a sticky, Orientalist fruit. Perhaps my physical experience watching the dance sequences in the film were an embodiment of my eroticizing of the Other. Perhaps this is the quintessence of what Brian Winston calls the tradition of the Griersonian victim.²³ Look how magical these foreigners are, and see how differently they dance! My, how different they are from me.

Not Just Plain Old Orientalism

The shooting of *Song of Ceylon* was paid for jointly by the Empire Marketing Board and the Ceylon Tea Marketing Board.²⁴ Here was Basil Wright, capturing the natives as they happily packaged tea for the British colonialists, taking his salary from the very marketing company that was exploiting the workers he filmed. There are of course the seemingly eternally smiling faces of the natives; this continuity is hard to believe, and hard to swallow as a white viewer who knows that the British Empire exploited the Ceylonese. If there are suffering natives on the island, they are not shown in Wright's film.

While at first glance *Song of Ceylon* lends itself to neat categorization as a classical, Orientalist ethnography, there are significant stylistic elements to the film and details about its provenance that suggest it might be more complicated than that. The sound track is perhaps the aspect of the film that most effectively reveals its overall complexity. As the credits run at the beginning of the film, a plaintive Ceylonese melody is sung by a male voice. The music credit is attributed to Walter Leigh while the "Commentary" credit reads "Robert Knox in the Year 1680." The text that is narrated over the course of the film is gleaned from the testimony of a certain sailor, Robert Knox, whose ship was damaged and found himself captured, along with his father, Captain Robert Knox, by the Ceylonese in 1658.²⁵ The text that Wright chose for the film, however, doesn't mention that Knox, the Brit, was held captive on the island for twenty years. So, while having a Western account of Ceylon read as the images of the land are presented seems immediately Orientalist, the extra twist of using a British captive's account of



276 years earlier, and ridding it of any reference to his captivity, sheds new light on the film. This reversal arguably works to begin counteracting an Orientalist interpretation of the film. Moreover, the selection from Knox's text that Wright chooses is in no way a proportional representation of the original 356-page account—Wright heavily emphasizes the role that Buddhism plays in the text, for example. One could say that Wright leaves out the vast majority of the damning parts of Knox's book.

The film is divided into four parts: "The Buddha," "The Virgin Island," "Voices of Commerce," and "The Apparel of the Gods." The reading of Knox's text is interspersed with diegetic sound of the natives as they are filmed, as well as an intricate composition by Walter Leigh that includes elements of Ceylonese music mixed with British voices that begin in the third section, at the twenty-third minute, just after the sequence of the children dancing with their teacher has ended in a peaceful moment of silence: "New clearings, new roads, new buildings, new communications, new developments of natural resources." While Knox's text is read in a wistful, almost nostalgic voice, these new voices are mechanical, statistical, extensions of a machine. The image simultaneously shown is of an elephant on the island knocking down a palm tree with the crown of its head. Commerce has arrived. The sound track speaks of dollars and cents as the reel shows imagery of halved coconuts, commodified goods. We hear a British radio transmission as we see shots of the transmission room, knobs, and clocks, intercut with shots of dusty Ceylonese landscape. And the grating sound of machines hums on and off throughout, so numbing that at times it's nearly inaudible.

In *The Use of the Film*, Wright comments on Leigh's creation: "the track had a life of its own; and when it was allied to the picture it was clear that Leigh had achieved a new and important synthesis. The picture said one thing; the track said something else. Together, the two produced a third quality denied to either of them separately."²⁶ Theoretically, Wright's analysis recalls Eisenstein and Kuleshov; Wright himself uses montage technique in the imagery that accompanies Leigh's sound track. As Wright juxtaposes the imagery of the radio transmission room and the Ceylonese landscape, the jumble of musical tracks collides into one surging mess, and the viewer experiences the horror, if only for a moment, of empire.

When asked by Alan Bloom in 1980 "Was there any film where you didn't have the freedom you wanted? Where you had to make a compromise that you really regret?", Basil

Wright replied:

[W]hen I was a very young man and had no resources, Grierson sent me around the Caribbean in 1933 to film the British Colonies; Jamaica, Barbados and all that chain of islands. I was alone and toting a camera about and I wasn't very experienced. I wished I could have managed to say more about the diabolical capitalist or British Colonial policy which was always so nice and fat. I got a bit of it into *Song of Ceylon* the next year, but, you see, if you're working for the Empire Marketing Board in the British Colonies, you can't do it.²⁷

There is of course the question of economic and political constraints to consider when looking at any work of art, government-subsidized or not. Had Wright had his way, perhaps the film would have been more obviously provocative and political. However, given that he didn't feel he could be as politically outspoken as he wanted to, he managed to produce an effect in at least one viewer that could certainly rival the kind of emotion provoked by a documentary (or really any film) with a strong ideological message.

Conclusion: On Poetry

Bill Nichols describes the "poetic mode" of documentary as being "particularly adept at opening up the possibility of alternative forms of knowledge to the straightforward transfer of information, the prosecution of a particular argument or point of view, or the presentation of reasoned propositions about problems in need of solution."²⁸ Nichols locates the beginnings of this mode at the dawn of modernism. The poetic mode, Nichols argues, was an extension of a fragmented view of reality, filled with "subjective impressions, incoherent acts, and loose associations."²⁹ The homelessness of the mind, to take a phrase from Peter Berger, manifested itself in the poetic mode.³⁰ After World War I, when rationality seemed to falter, it is no surprise that a pacifist like Basil Wright grabbed his camera and set out for Ceylon to seek new forms of knowledge. It was his favorite of all the movies he ever made.³¹

Song of Ceylon would fall comfortably in the category of poetic mode, but Nichols, somewhat uncharacteristically, glosses over its nuance. According to Nichols, the film is about "the untouched beauty of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) despite the inroads of



commerce and colonialism."³² He lists it among a handful of others, all of which he claims "return to a more classic sense of unity and beauty and discover traces of them in the historical world."³³ Nichols misses an opportunity here to discuss the complex structure and rather aggressive (if implicit) interrogation of the very notion of classic unity and beauty that the film carries out.

Despite Nichols' oversight, the film still serves as a powerful example of the poetic mode. It is not direct cinema, nor is it purely observational; it is not making an explicit claim to tell the whole truth about the Ceylonese people. The filmmaker's hand is very heavy both in the shooting itself as well as in the editing. I would argue in fact that the treatment of the footage and the sound is so experimental and extraordinary that Wright cannot be accused of perpetuating the myths of purity or objectivity. The cuts are drastic and noticeable. The film is an incomplete portrait, a riff on a text from 1680, a symphony of movement and sound that is resolved with the banging of a gong.

"Poetic" seems to be the word people use when they're not quite sure what to call something. Like the word "lyric," it tends to signify some sort of eruption, a break from the continuous flow of prose. Grierson describes Wright as having "this inner feeling for movement," "a sort of inner gift of movement."³⁴ The force is within the man, it's inner, it's unexplained, it's a gift. It's an inner knowledge that guides him, that manifests itself in his work, which leaves a trace of that knowledge for the viewer to grasp.

As to my experience watching *Song of Ceylon*, I found the most truthful resonance in Comolli's insight into documentary film:

Since its making requires confrontation with a world, it will offer testimony and the trace of this encounter, as an abutment on the stubborn part of this world, one resistant to our tales, our computing. That part will always resist, with something of its toughness; it will resist our efforts of seduction.³⁵

I can call it poetic, or lyric, or simply art, but the knowledge that the dance sequences in *Song of Ceylon* seemed to possess and somehow, upon my viewing of them, conjure in me, eludes easy classification. It falls in the magical realm of negotiation between reality, its representation, and its viewer, that we call documentary.

Notes

- 1 *The British Documentary Movement*. Volume 1, E.M.B. classics [videorecording]. 109 mins: sd., b&w; ½ in. New York: Kino Video, 1992. *Drifters*, 1929 (49 min.); *Industrial Britain*, 1933 (21 min.); *Song of Ceylon*, 1934 (39 min.).
- 2 Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, 145.
- 3 Sussex, Elizabeth. *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary: The Story of the Film Movement Founded by John Grierson*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975, 24.
- 4 Nichols, 148.
- 5 Sussex, 57.
- 6 Mareth, Paul and Alan Bloom. "Basil Wright: An Interview." *Film & History*, Vol 10, Issue 4, December 1980, 78.
- 7 Wright, Basil. *The Use of the Film*. New York: Arno Press & The New York Times: 1972, 38.
- 8 Ibid., 39.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Aitken, Ian. *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990, 58.
- 11 Ibid., 58.
- 12 Ibid., 54-55.
- 13 Capps, John M. and Donald Capps, Eds. *James and Dewey on Belief and Experience*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005, 268.
- 14 Ibid., 269-70.
- 15 Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1937, 169.
- 16 Hardy, Forsyth, Ed. *Grierson on Documentary*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971, 146.
- 17 Capps, 275.
- 18 Dewey, 312.
- 19 Gaines, Jane. "Political Mimesis." *Collecting Visible Evidence*. Eds. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 94.
- 20 Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Genre Reader II*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995, 140.
- 21 Ibid., 143.
- 22 Comolli, Jean-Louis. "Documentary Journey to the Land of the Head Shrinkers." Trans. Annette Michelson. *October*, Vol. 90, Autumn 1999, 38.
- 23 Winston, Brian. "The Tradition of the Victim in Griersonian Documentary." Ed. Alan Rosenthal. *New Challenges for Documentary*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, 269-287.
- 24 Sussex, 49.
- 25 Knox, Robert. *An Historical Relation of Ceylon*. Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasakayo, 1966, 250.
- 26 Wright, 17.
- 27 Mareth, 79.
- 28 Nichols, 103.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Berger, Peter L., Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner. *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*. New York: Random House, 1973.
- 31 Sussex, 99.
- 32 Nichols, 105.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Sussex, 111.
- 35 Comolli, 41.



Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*

By M. G. MOSCATO

Enthusiasts have vigilantly followed Terrence Malick's rather plodding yet stunning career of more than thirty years—from *Badlands* (1973) on through *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and further. The excitement just might reach an even higher pitch now with this *auteur's* latest indelible film, *The Tree of Life* (2011). To use the brazen words of the young Jack O'Brien, Malick's central protagonist: *The Tree of Life* indeed feels like such an exuberant "experiment" that tests so many boundaries throughout the loose narrative. However, it likewise (and more often) feels like a carefully wrought plan. Whether that plan succeeds or not perhaps depends upon one's values, aesthetics, and/or simply patience. First, the film forces the viewer to do some heavy critical thinking, associative leaps, and serious interpretive "work." Images and themes are rhymed, riffed on, and paralleled throughout with such surprising intensity that the time spent merely "watching" is nearly equal to that spent in simultaneous contemplation. Ultimately, the active viewer should find the experience a rewarding one—and with a plethora of rich images and meanings to sift through. In short, however, the film follows the childhood of Jack O'Brien (the youth played by a talented, unknown Hunter McCracken, and the adult Jack played by Sean Penn). Like so many childhoods, the feelings and memories are not easily forgotten: the innocence lost; a tyrannical father (Brad Pitt) steeped in the ever-restricting box of conservative Christianity in 1950s, middle-class America; and the bonds of brotherhood forever felt but torn apart by an early death in the family.

While the O'Brien family thus remains a narrative centerpiece or grounding point for the film, clearly larger themes are at work here. Certainly the film delivers several stirring performances and poignant moments with regards to the acting talents who represent the O'Brien family: again, Penn, Pitt, Jessica Chastain (who plays Mrs. O'Brien), and especially McCracken. However, Malick frames his entire, seemingly simple American family drama with the powerful complexity of an experimental formalist—also via an agnostic's utterly critical yet awestruck vision of the world, even the universe.

First, from the angle of a rather cerebral though nonetheless emotionally fulfilling approach to cinema, Malick understands his medium all too well by this juncture in his career. Also, by a likely combination of intuition, study, and experience, Malick knows the very pivotal, inherent strengths of film. As in *The Thin Red Line*, *The Tree of Life* demonstrates, too, the very nature of the uniquely epic and fluid canvas that cinema offers. The edges of every shot seem to wrap around in a grand mimicry of peripheral vision as well. Take, for example, the figure of the mother wandering in a salt flat's vast blanket of white—or the inverted play of boys' shadows on the surface of a street in mid-summer. And, surely, these brilliantly crafted images are in no small part thanks to the cinematography of Emmanuel Lubezki (who has worked with Malick before, and with other renowned



The O'Brien Family

filmmakers like the Coen brothers and Alfonso Cuarón). Just as prevalent in Malick and Lubezki's collaboration: hardly, if any, a still shot or moment is to be found in *The Tree of Life*. What could be more appropriate for a medium whose primary principle is that of *motion*? Even in the very few instances where the camera or frame is stationary, the filmmakers still place within the shot something utterly constant in its movement and flux. For example, we see a vague but continuously twisting, rainbow-hued cosmic element—something that, again, seems to be “rhymed” with images elsewhere of moving, even entwining, human hands.

(Also of special note about the visual intensity, and on a more comparative level: not too long before Malick's film, Werner Herzog recently released his own spectacular *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), a rare documentary feature shot entirely in 3-D. One common observation about 3-D is the utter exhaustion of the visual senses being so overwhelmed and “forced” to view such intense images and for such a sustained period. The reason for mentioning Herzog's work in relation to Malick's film: these two recent films may actually possess some commonality in their taxation on optical brain functions and nerves. So meticulously composed and replete with movement is every single shot in *The Tree of Life* that viewers may feel as though they have just been overwhelmed by the similarly heavy demands of a contemporary 3-D film.)

Another chief power of cinema is, of course, its uncanny ability to collapse both time and space (usually through editing). Malick uniquely highlights this rather formal and strange property—and uses it to effectively comment on a larger existential problem. For example, the film opens with a primary focus on particularly human concerns: dilemmas of memory, family, mortality, and the testing of a rigidly conservative brand of Christian faith in the face of death. Malick at first *appears* to abandon this narrative, however, as the film transitions or even veers into an extended sequence of sprawling prehistory and cosmology free from the time and space constraints of conventional narratives (like that very opening one). We now encounter the violent, volcanic origins of our planet, its early inhabitant giants, the dinosaurs, and Earth's extremely diminutive and indeed insignificant place in the incomprehensibly vast though nonetheless sparkling and magnificent universe.

At one point we even observe a large, raptor-like dinosaur as it approaches some young, potential prey by a gurgling stream. The predator toys with the prey then threateningly, or perhaps playfully, pins its head to the ground. Something flashes across the mind of great reptilian, though. It cocks its head, gives pause, and finally saunters then speeds away. Herein, at least two crucial meanings seem suggested. First, the capacity of empathy—a trait so often and misguidedly reserved solely for humans, often in order to set humans apart as superiors—gets assigned to the natural realm of animals, here, the dinosaurs. Second, and really a subordinate or reinforcing point, Malick later connects this empathy in the two young O'Brien brothers. For instance, after being handed by Jack a thick, two-by-four block of wood as fair retribution for an earlier incident, R. L. feigns a couple of swings of the makeshift weapon but chooses not to bludgeon his older brother—not unlike the special preference earlier shown to the dinosaur prey.

In all—Earth's prehistory, the dinosaur's era and their cataclysmic extinction, and the emphasis on the immense cosmos—the non-narrative segment plays for approximately twenty minutes. Perhaps due to the viewer's lack of anticipation

though, this unconventional and salient sequence feels like eons. Admittedly, some audiences may feel they have been exposed to something akin to a daunting diatribe; however, that seems to miss the larger point. In sum, the sequence delivers an almost objective correlative effect and, in all probability, a highly calculated one: by way of film's essential formal properties and strengths, Malick finally whips viewers back to the narrative of the O'Brien family and their now comparatively small, even petty, problems.

Expansive time periods and galaxies fold onto themselves thusly—again, largely thanks to such filmic powers of editing, motion, and fluidity. Several underwater shots highlight the equally fluid and greater life-giving potencies of the ocean, wondrous aquatic ecosystems, and, essentially, water—the conduit for so much of life. In fact, many significant moments in *The Tree of Life* occur within physical and/or symbolically juxtaposed proximity to water—such as Jack's own birth, which Malick uses to bring viewers back from the brink of an almost nihilistic worldview of the cosmos and humanity's uncertain place in such an unknowable scheme.

From there the story really belongs to young Jack, his familial relationships, and, primarily, his “loss of innocence.” Indeed we empathize with Jack as he experiences those almost universally problematic emotions of love, lust, wrath, and hate, and the peculiarly masculine and dangerous impulse to destroy. We relate to the general alterations of the self as it encounters a dawning awareness of these troublesome feelings. We relate to Jack's plight, even if we might not share the specifics of his rapidly closing childhood and looming adolescence: i.e. that ubiquitous, boyhood “experiment” with the poor frog strapped to the side of a bottle rocket; the foolish carousing of children as they express wanton acts of vandalism; or the sullyng act and guilty theft with the attractive neighbor's lingerie. Emphasis is also placed on the development of Jack's problematic though touching relationship with his father. At times, we glimpse the love and admiration that each possesses for the other. However, the feelings vacillate throughout their many rifts and fewer bonds: from a relationship based less on respect than fear to the alienation caused by ritual piety and overzealous lectures. Understandably, Jack rebels against such authority, but he nears a breaking point where misbehavior and disobedience turn to something darker, albeit rather fleeting, in his desire for his father's death. And his father's stubborn, often loveless stock in Christianity eventually wears thin. For it rarely offers any explanations or even consolations whenever so required by the trials of life and death. We finally thus observe the gradual impact of such intrapersonal changes with Jack upon the interpersonal dynamics with those closest to him—again, with his father, mother, and brothers.

In fact, it truly is a mighty feat how Malick employs this main narrative (the human drama of Jack and the O'Brien family). In other words, this very small, personal story is used to effectively temper that lost, postmodern sense with an agnostic's necessarily vague and barely clinging notion of hope—hope for some meaning, any meaning.¹ And we as viewers feel the weight and power of it all: Malick's searching quest; his critique of antiquated, monotheistic mindsets; yet his admirably persistent and vibrant awe for life.

Notes

¹ Part of the success may well lie with some of the biographical parallels between Malick's own family and the O'Brien family, suggesting that *The Tree of Life* is Malick's most personal film yet.

Rogue Vehicles

DAVID CRONENBERG'S *FAST COMPANY*
AND THE TAX SHELTER PERIOD



By MARK PLAYER

David Cronenberg's *Fast Company* (1978) has always had somewhat of a controversial presence in the director's filmography. A love letter to his passion for cars and motor racing rather than a clinical and abject exploration of the human body, which is what he is perhaps best known for doing; especially at the time. It seems to be a quirky addition to an otherwise thematically unified career. The film arrived during the height of Cronenberg's corporeal exploration; his 'body-horror' period, that started with the iconoclastic *Shivers* (1975) and finished with his remake, *The Fly* (1986). These were films that blended elements of horror, psychological thriller, erotica and science fiction into an idiosyncratic sub-genre obsessed with bodily augmentation and sexual deviance. However, *Fast Company* embraces none of these traits; it is not horror or science fiction, nor does it draw on Cronenberg's usual abject intellectualism. Instead, it is a straight-laced movie about funny car and dragster racing and as a result, is usually ostracised by film critics and scholars. In the preface to his systematic, career spanning work, *The Artist as Monster*, William Beard frankly announces the exclusion of the film from his study; dismissing it as 'formulaic' and 'uninteresting', and then later on as: 'bland, utterly unpersonal'¹.

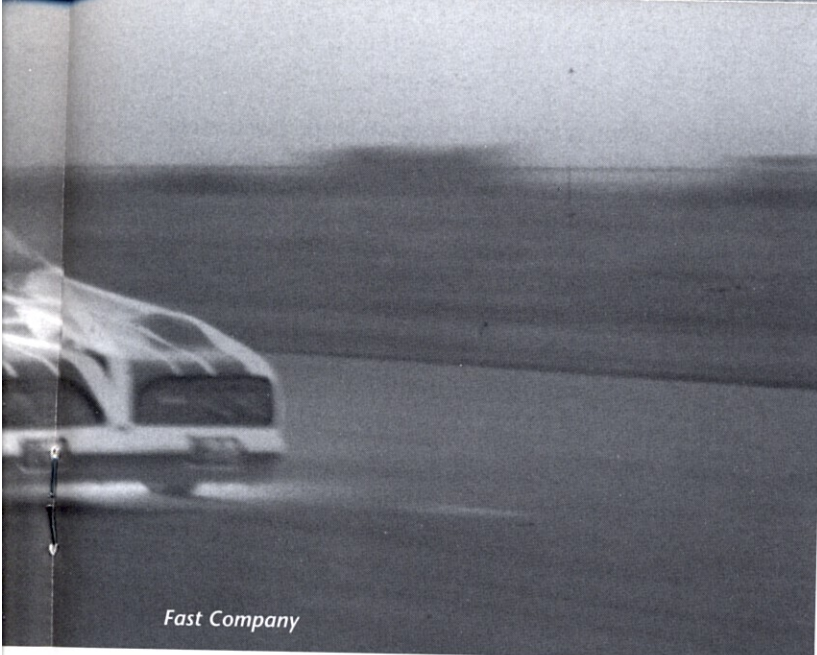
However, Ernest Mathijs, author of *The Cinema of David Cronenberg: From Baron of Blood to Cultural Hero*, defends the film and its unwelcome presence in an oeuvre that belongs to somebody like Cronenberg. One of the few film scholars to offer any serious or in depth consideration on the subject, Mathijs argues that *Fast Company* acts as a missing link of 'evolution between Cronenberg's avant-garde work, his early horror shockers and his later work' and that it is: 'a move towards professionalism that made him a filmmaker able to successfully negotiate his concerns'². But what of the film itself? Though it may not immediately display the artistic value or thematic depth of his other work, *Fast Company* does indeed mark a pivotal point in Cronenberg's then burgeoning career as well as a vital time-capsule for an interesting and turbulent period of Canadian cinema: the tax-shelter scheme.

The tax-shelter incentives of the 1970s and early 1980s were designed to galvanise and stimulate a national film industry by encouraging businesses to invest their profits into cinema production and in return, be able to deduct said investment from their taxable income. The system, however, was quickly abused as investors annually took advantage of what has been

described by Cronenberg on Cronenberg editor Chris Rodley as a 'hideous loophole'. Rodley goes on to explain that the scheme allowed 'anyone with money to burn to promise investment in a specific production. At that point, the investor could write off tax owed on a much larger sum, actually contributing a much smaller amount to the making of the movie'³. It is also, as noted by George Melnyk, a period largely seen as being a 'source of cultural embarrassment', where 'the prevailing mimicry of American film values resulted in hundreds of unseen and third-rate products'⁴. For the last three decades, it would be fair to say that *Fast Company* has been regarded as one such "third-rate product".

Although it was shot in the province of Alberta, *Fast Company*—as was the case with many Canadian productions at the time—was designed to look as American as possible for increased marketability and to give it more of a chance against the direct competition of Hollywood. The three top-billing leads were borrowed from the US, with actors William Smith, John Saxon and former playmate of the year turned B-Movie goddess Claudia Jennings hailing from Missouri, New York and Illinois respectively. American cities are mentioned in the dialogue (Seattle for instance) and there is a significant amount of red, white and blue used in the production design. It is most noticeable in the colour scheme of the FastCo racing team—the cars, the transportation vehicles, even the crew overalls. But perhaps the most overt emulation of Americana is Fred Mollin's theme music; aspirational, hard-rocking odes to burning fuel, the open road and free spiritedness. It is these factors among others that have helped generate such critical distaste for the film.

As previously noted by Beard, the storyline of *Fast Company* is, admittedly, a rather formulaic one. Veteran driver Lonnie "Lucky Man" Johnson (William Smith) is the fading star of a racing team sponsored by FastCo, a manufacturer of car performance products. The rest of the unit, consisting of young protégé driver Billy "The Kid" Bocker (Nicholas Campbell), lead mechanic Elder (Don Francks), second mechanic and rig driver PJ (Robert Haley) and sexy FastCo mascot Candy (Judy Foster) still believe in Johnson's abilities. Team manager and FastCo executive Phil Adamson (John Saxon) is not so inclined; less concerned with winning and glory and more concerned with sticking to budget and re-enforcing the FastCo brand. Tension mounts when "Lucky Man" lives up to his name after writing-



Fast Company

off the FastCo concept drag racer in a spectacular crash, emerging from the wreckage unscathed. Believing that Johnson is "over the hill", Adamson starts making a new bet with rival race driver Gary "The Blacksmith" Black (Cedric Smith) and his team. Angered by this, Johnson ejects Adamson and carries on as an independent, but not before Adamson has acquired the last remaining FastCo car. Johnson and his team steal the car back in time for the final race against the "Blacksmith" to decide who is the best.

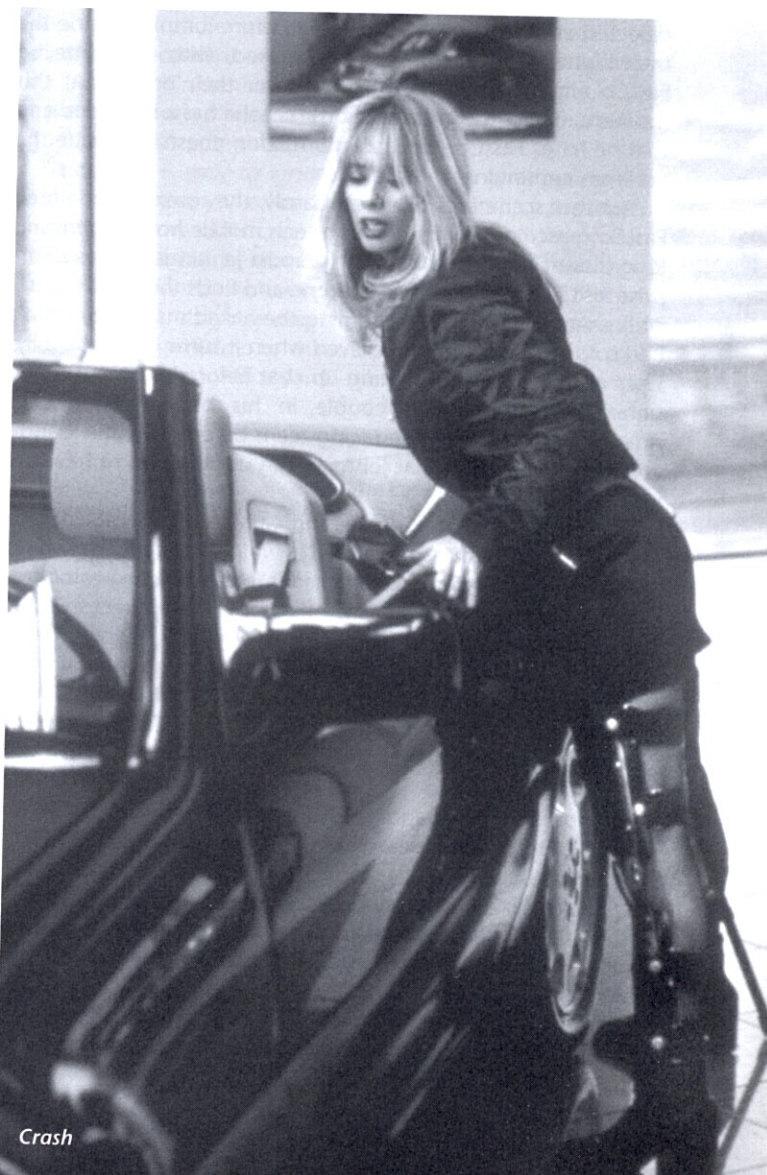
Fast Company then, was Cronenberg's first attempt at a proper mainstream movie. Certainly, he'd had financial success with his previous horror films for exploitation producers Cinépix. *Shivers* and its successor *Rabid* (1977) had grossed \$5 million⁵ and \$7 million dollars⁶ respectively, but this had come at a price. The artistic merits of *Shivers* were famously debated in the Canadian House of Commons, brought about by a very high-profile and very public attack on the film by influential magazine editor Robert Fulford. Fulford expressed extreme dislike over the fact that it was part-funded by taxpayers' money, headlining his review for the film with: 'You Should Know How Bad This Film Is. After All, You Paid For It'⁷. And the equally abject *Rabid* confused audiences by negating any exposition with regards to the origin of the strange vampiric appendage that lurked under the armpit of its leading lady, former porn-star Marilyn Chambers.

But despite playing it much safer this time around in terms of content, as well as getting 'name' actors on board (that hadn't previously been in porno), *Fast Company* sank without a trace almost instantly; failing to secure any sustainable release due to a complex web of litigation issues created by the film financiers, as well as a near-bankrupt distributor⁸. From their perspective, *Fast Company* was successful in that it got produced at all. It didn't matter to them whether the film was shown once it was completed, or even if it was of good quality. Like so many Canadian films made at the time, the quality—at least in the eyes of those with the financial power—was deemed unimportant so long as they were able to perform their tax write-offs. It was Cronenberg's first project under this well-meaning but ultimately misguided initiative. However, it was not his last; taking advantage of the system three more times before it was put to a stop in the early 1980s⁹.

And yet, *Fast Company* remains an important work in the Cronenberg catalogue, even if the financiers and critics like

Beard are compelled to disagree. As pointed out by Mathijs earlier, the film marks a step towards a new-found level of professionalism, as well as sowing the creative and logistical seeds for his next and most famous decade of work. Upon closer inspection, many of Cronenberg's recurring themes and ideas are either present or anticipated here; just not in an instantly recognisable way.

Firstly, the film is notable for its personnel. It introduced Cronenberg to: 'a number of important collaborators that helped determine his unique style'¹⁰ and that he would work with again and again. Cinematographer Mark Irwin worked with Cronenberg five more times, from *The Brood* (1979) through to *The Fly*; Art Director/Production Director Carol Spier has worked on everything apart from *Spider* (2002), *A Dangerous Method* (2011) and the upcoming *Cosmopolis* (2012); Film Editor Ronald Sanders has since edited all bar one of Cronenberg's films and Sound Editor/Recordist Bryan Day has performed a variety of audio related duties for *The Brood*, *Videodrome* (1983), *The Dead Zone* (1983), *The Fly*, *Dead Ringers* (1988), *Naked Lunch* (1991) and *M. Butterfly* (1993). As a result, the look, rhythm and overall feel of Cronenberg's subsequent films can be attributed to his work on *Fast Company*, promoting Cronenberg from exploitation purveyor to legitimate filmmaking institution with a dedicated team, each with their own specialism.



Crash

Secondly, *Fast Company* is notable for being the first time that Cronenberg worked from a concept that was not his own; co-writing independently along with Phil Savath, Courtney Smith and Nicholas Campbell at various stages from an original story by Alan Treen. Unbeknownst to Cronenberg at the time, who would revert back to his unique brand of body-horror scenarios in time for his next feature, this would later start a trend of adapting previously existing source material; be it a book (*The Dead Zone*, *Naked Lunch*, *Crash* (1996), *Spider*), a film remake (*The Fly*), a stage production (*M. Butterfly*), a graphic novel (*A History of Violence* (2005)), or based on real people (*Dead Ringers*).

Cronenberg's interest with technological impact on humankind is present—albeit motor instead of medical—to the point where it almost becomes fetishistic. Leering close-ups of engines and chassis as well as plenty of imagery of driver's inside the cars, seemingly merged with their surrounding racing equipment. Scenes of mechanics painstakingly finding the right fuel balance for their vehicles suggest further thoughts on symbiosis between man and machine.

There is also an undercurrent of sexual liberation and promiscuity throughout; something that had been brought to the forefront in both *Shivers* and *Rabid*. Billy "The Kid" Brocker initiates a threesome with two hitch-hikers in as much time as it takes to for them to climb into the back of the FastCo trailer. Sanders cuts to get a reaction from Billy's crew-mate PJ, looking dejected and somewhat bewildered before jumping inside the trailer where the girls are already naked, with Billy drizzling FastCo engine lubrication product over their breasts. At this moment, one of the girls mentions that she has a boyfriend and that he hates FastCo, but this information doesn't dissuade the act from continuing.

Another scene sees Billy bed Candy, the recently appointed FastCo mascot, in Johnson's high-tech mobile home. Johnson's long distance girlfriend Sammy (Claudia Jennings) makes a surprise visit, lets herself into the home and finds the couple post-coitus. At first she freaks, assuming the naked man in Johnson's bed to be Johnson, but is relieved when it turns out to be Billy. They engage in blasé catching-up chat before Johnson returns, unfazed by the naked couple in his bed. They discuss Adamson's betrayal of the racing team before Billy and Candy are asked to leave so that Johnson can use the bed to have his way with Sammy.

This nonchalant mix of sex and cars bares resemblance to J.G. Ballard's novella *Crash* (1973), which Cronenberg would adapt and make his own two decades later. Mark Browning frequently notes Ballard's literary influence on the director in his book *David Cronenberg: Author or Filmmaker?*¹¹, whilst Linda Kauffman acknowledges Ballard and Cronenberg's mutual fascination with 'anatomy, biology [and] sexuality'¹² in *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture*. Indeed, both men concern themselves over how modernity can warp the body and mind in new and unexplored ways. Take Cronenberg's *Shivers* and Ballard's novel *High Rise* (1975) for example. Both were released in the same year and both, coincidentally, focus on the tenants of an exclusive, luxury apartment complex degenerating into primal, non-civilised activity within the confines of their private, ultra-modern environment—wild sexual frenzy and territorial dominance through violence respectively.

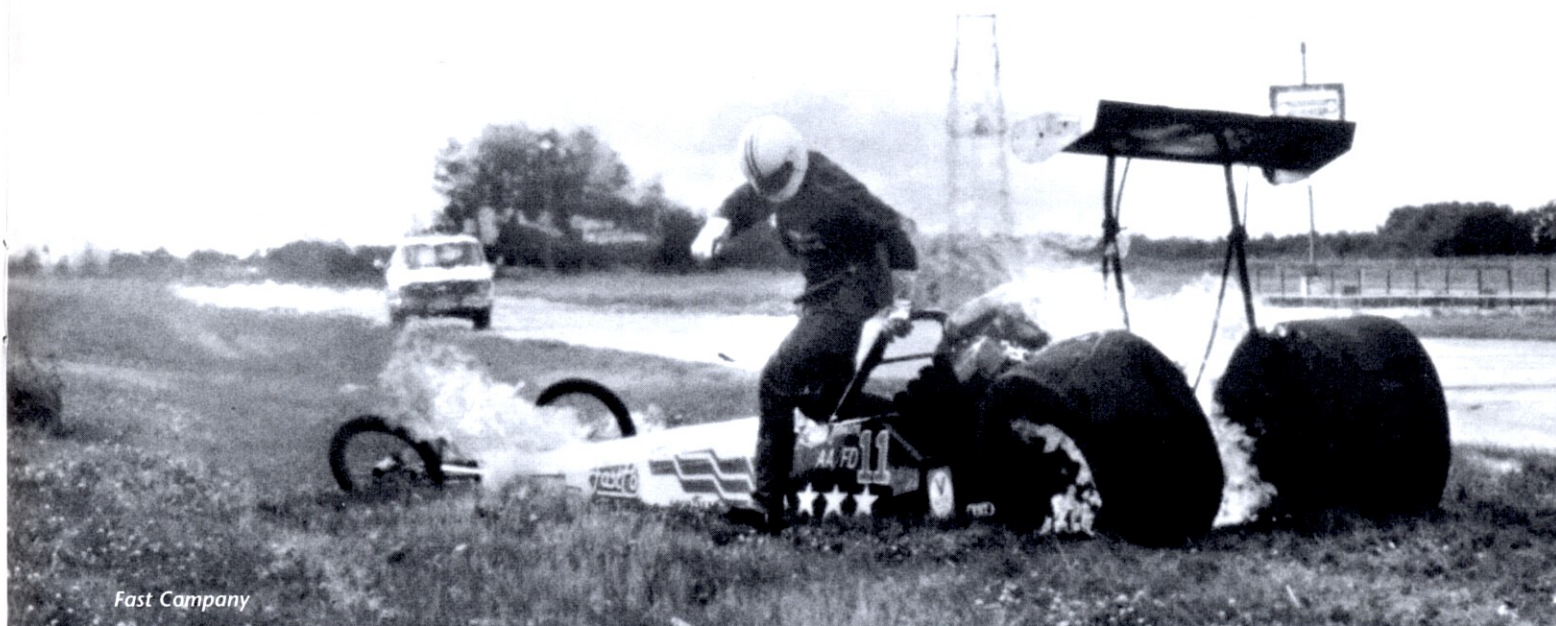
Fast Company and *Crash*—both Ballard's original text and Cronenberg's subsequent adaptation—make for particularly

interesting comparison due to their obsessive fixation with vehicles. The incorporation of car accessories and racing paraphernalia with sexual intercourse in *Fast Company* feels like an unwitting precursor to *Crash*; a test drive for the ideas that Cronenberg would explore later in full. The dislocation and dehumanisation of Ballard's concrete and steel nightmare also resonates in the form of the endless, straight-as-an-arrow highways that the race team use to travel to various racetracks, not to mention the racetracks themselves; unnaturally ridged unfurlings of tarmac that defiantly segregate the countryside, scorched by high-speed carnage and surrounded by constructs of metal thrust.

At the heart of this dehumanisation is another Cronenberg staple: the scientific corporation. It's not too difficult to imagine the FastCo annual general meeting taking place just down the corridor from that of ConSec or Biocarbon Amalgamate (from *Scanners*), or Spectacular Optical (*Videodrome*). Other Cronenberg institutes include the Canadian Academy of Erotic Enquiry as found in his first experimental feature *Stereo* (1969); the House of Skin Clinic and the Institute of Neo-Venereal Disease in his second, *Crimes of the Future* (1970); the Somafree Institute from *The Brood* as well as Antenna Research and Cortical Systematics as found in *eXistenZ* (1999). Although, admittedly, FastCo is perhaps the most "normal" out of this list, the impact it has on the characters of the story is just as significant; an omnipotent presence and a guiding hand in all that the transpires within the narrative.

Cronenberg's eventual switch from female protagonist to male is also foreshadowed in *Fast Company*. *Shivers*, *Rabid* and *The Brood* each 'focused on women's bodies being experimented on by men'¹³, whereas *Scanners*, *Videodrome*, *The Dead Zone* and beyond have almost always centred around a male lead. *Fast Company* facilitates this changeover. The men here are chauvinistic and hyper-masculine; not the helpless victims that Cronenberg has sometimes depicted them previously. "Lucky Man" Johnson is the consummate, square-jawed professional. He is compassionate, but not too weak-spirited to throw a punch if the occasion calls for it. It is this strong-headed nature and unflappable professionalism exhibited by him and his race team that predictably allows them to succeed in the end. The female characters—Sammy, Candy and the two hitch-hikers—remain sexually liberal, like in *Shivers* and *Rabid*, but not in the context of venereal revolution. Indeed, a problem that many have with *Fast Company* is that the film is too straight-laced, too literal. This is the kind of movie where the hero's racing team wear white overalls and the opposing team wear black. The sex is purely for recreation, not the gears that power the psychosexual philosophy that crops up time and time again in Cronenberg's oeuvre. The violence can not be read as metaphorical indictments of the human condition—sexually transmitted disease, invasive medical procedures, technological dependency and the media age are popular targets for analysts. Three people meet grisly ends in *Fast Company*—one by explosion, one by plane crash and the other by being set on fire—but each is safely couched within the easily understood context of the antagonists getting their comeuppance.

However, *Fast Company* retains a certain fondness for Cronenberg as 'it is connected with one of the director's private passions: motor racing'¹⁴. Whilst it is certainly most apparent here, Ernest Mathijs also argues that vehicles—especially cars—have always played an important role in Cronenberg's cinema both before and after *Fast Company*. The end of *Shivers* sees the



Fast Company

'plague/revolution spread from Starliner Island via a car convoy', whilst a motor-cycle crash in *Rabid* lies at 'the beginning of Rose's infection and rage'¹⁵. After *Fast Company*, many important catalysts or plot revelations are also executed via cars: Frank thinking he has saved Candice in *The Brood*; Cameron getting the opportunity to turn the tide against ConSec in *Scanners* and Max learning about the purpose of the Videodrome broadcast in *Videodrome*. Johnny's ability to see into the future is given to him via a car accident in *The Dead Zone* and the reason for Seth Brundle inventing his telepod devices in *The Fly* is because of his chronic car sickness¹⁶. And of course there is *Crash*, that sees its protagonist, James Ballard, get increasingly involved and obsessed with a strange cult who get a sexual thrill from auto-wrecks and near-death experience.

In tandem with the redeeming qualities of Cronenberg's *Fast Company*, the tax-shelter system is also not without merit. In *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema*, George Melnyk admits that the 'era was not a complete disaster'¹⁷. If there had never been tax incentives, it is likely that Cronenberg would not have been able to make *The Brood*, *Scanners* or *Videodrome*—his other "shelter" films—with the same liberation and daring than if he had produced them through Hollywood means, for instance. The system also helped launch the careers of the likes of Ivan Reitman who, soon after producing Cronenberg's *Shivers*, would go on to reap financial and critical success with American films like *Ghostbusters* (1984). Also, there was Bob Clark who, incidentally, emigrated from America to Canada and produced some of the country's most profitable films of the 1970s and 80s including *Black Christmas* (1974), *Porky's* (1982) and its sequel *Porky's II: The Next Day* (1983).

But while *Fast Company* marked the beginning of an era for Cronenberg, it also signalled the end to others. It featured the last film role of Claudia Jennings, who would, eerily enough, die as a result of a car accident in October 1979. The film also arrived towards the end of the drive-in movie era, then in its death throes, which had whole-heartedly embraced

Cronenberg's earlier exploitation features. Its successor, the advent and popularity of home video technology, would form the basis for Cronenberg's most thematically ambitious and challenging work, *Videodrome*, which coincidentally marked the end of his involvement with tax incentives.

Though it is easy to ignore and polemic to suggest otherwise, *Fast Company* is a key text in understanding the motivations and psyche of its creator. It is the exception that emphasises the dogged unity that is attributed to rest of Cronenberg's work but yet in certain contexts, still feels relevant. To dismiss *Fast Company* outright is akin to leaving the puzzle incomplete, and it is perhaps ironic to think that Cronenberg's most mainstream and straightforward movie represents the most unorthodox piece.

Notes

- 1 Beard, William—*The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg* (2nd Revised Edition), (University of Toronto Press, 2006), xxi & 165
- 2 Mathijs, Ernest—*The Cinema of David Cronenberg: From Baron of Blood to Cultural Hero* (Wallflower Press, 2008), 68–69
- 3 Rodley, Chris (Ed)—*Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (2nd Revised Edition), (Faber and Faber, 1997), 68
- 4 Melnyk, George—*One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (University of Toronto Press, 2004), 121
- 5 Rodley; 1997, 52
- 6 Rodley; 1997, 57
- 7 Grant, Michael (Ed)—Introduction to *The Modern Fantastic: The Films of David Cronenberg* (Flicks Books, 2000), 21–22
- 8 Morris, Peter—*David Cronenberg: A Delicate Balance* (Toronto ECW Press, 1994), 86
- 9 Rodley; 1997, 64–108
- 10 Mathijs; 2008, 65
- 11 Browning, Mark—*David Cronenberg: Author or Filmmaker?* (Intellect Books, 2007)
- 12 Kauffman, Linda S—*Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* (University of California Press, 1998), 149
- 13 Marriott, James—*Horror Films* (Virgin Books, 2004), 255
- 14 Rodley; 1997, 70
- 15 Mathijs; 2008, 69
- 16 Ibid
- 17 Melnyk; 2004, 123



Emotional Fault Lines in *Café de Flore*

By ALSEGUL KOC

"The aftershocks of an amorous earthquake" is how I can describe director Jean-Marc Vallée's latest film *Café de Flore*. As such, it leaves an unsettling aftertaste on the palate as you exit the movie theatre. This, by all means, is a refreshing experience. Few films I have seen recently have troubled me as much as *Café de Flore*. The film is not without its flaws as Vallée turns it into a daring experiment, by writing, directing and editing it himself, casting a non-actor in the lead role and time/space lapsing between 60s Paris and contemporary Montreal. Perhaps out of an auteur-itch on his part following *Young Victoria* (2009), *Café de Flore* delves head-on into the sensibilities of its characters the way popular and critically acclaimed *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (2005) never did. Though the latter two films share music as the guiding thread that ties the past and the present, love lost and found, escapism and brutal reality, *Café de Flore* sets a dangerously bare emotional *timbre*. Like Antoine (played by musician Kevin Parent), a successful DJ who likes to cut off the music during a set only to restart it to a heightened awareness and renewed energy of the audience, Vallée leaves much unsaid to amplify the horrors and joys of letting go and starting anew.

Café de Flore spins around two stories: In 60s Paris single, working class mother Jacqueline (Vanessa Paradis) raises a much adored son Laurent (Marin Gerrier) who has Down syndrome.

In contemporary Montreal Antoine confides guilt ridden doubts in therapy about having left his long time lover and mother of his two daughters, Carole (Hélène Florent) for a newly flourished infatuation with a younger woman, Rose (Évelyn Brochu). If this were a mid-life crisis 'under control', things would have gone back to 'normal', the family restored and 'that woman' defeated à la Hollywood where 'that womanhood' is the ultimate target of a paternalistic witch hunt with consequences as deadly as *Fatal Attraction*. Vallée takes the spectator elsewhere to a rather painful rite of passage where each and everyone involved even those in the periphery have to suffer to the point of forgiveness. "Je te demande pardon!" Carole, the abandoned one says to Antoine after a frantic car ride, showing up unannounced, deranged at Rose and Antoine's tainted-blissful love-nest. In this cathartic moment, instead of an act of violence the audience possibly anticipates like Pavlov's voyeur-canine, Carole and Antoine hold each other tight, joined by Rose. The viewer could assume it had to be Antoine who needed to ask for forgiveness first. That is where Vallée moves us to the grey zone in which life takes place: one cannot break free unless the Other lets go. The release has to be empathetic, mutual. One is bound to the Other. This amorphic understanding of the Self and the Other is also paralleled in the relationship between



Jacqueline and Laurent where Jacqueline tiptoes around the margins of her own sanity and authority over the Other/her son. Jacqueline can solely reunite with her son not only in recognizing his will but also by becoming accomplice to his cutting loose from her.

This focus on phenomenological intersubjectivity is what sets *Café de Flore* apart from other popular love triangle movies. One remarkable scene features Carole and Rose running into each other at an intersection. In silent stupor the two women gaze into each other's eyes, emanating both love and pain. Carole's voice over then gives way to the next scene where she recounts the experience to her best friend who simply responds by saying "She (Rose) has a big ass." In *Tout le monde en parle*, a popular Quebec talk show, actors Florent and Brochu reflect on the complexity of the scene. Brochu says that it is the 'feminine empathy that she sees around her and in her own life but rarely in film'¹. Carole, in her awareness of the first sparkles of attraction between Antoine and Rose at a party, is unalarmed until what she deems a passing desire rocks the solid foundations of her relationship with Antoine. In Paris Jacqueline trivializes Laurent's devotion to Véronique, (Alice Dubois) a young girl also with Down syndrome, by asking Laurent if he is not too

young to have a lover. Laurent says no. Both Carole and Jacqueline have to come to terms with what is already happening beyond their control and irreversibly changing their lives. The seismic shocks, as painful as they may be, are the only way these strong willed women embrace loss and extend themselves bare, vulnerable and anew to the Other.

I am tempted to read the psychic, karmic cycle as a substitute for dethroned Catholicism in Quebec. The family values promoted by Antoine's father are no longer in effect. In fact the subdued presence of the male lead vis à vis the strength of the women may even point to an abandoning of the father figure both politically and psychologically as a contemporary René Lévesque is nowhere in sight. But there is much more to *Café de Flore* than a concise history of Quebec's changing values as Vallée sends a clin d'oeil to the thrills of the psyche in the style of Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), mysticism in Kieslowski's *Double Life of Veronique* (1991) and the unyielding force of images in Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966) especially if you stay to the very end when the credits roll.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CeiP5WEj7BM> 6:12

Eve Arnold

IN MEMORIAM 1912–2012

Eve Arnold was long associated with the prestigious Magnum Photo agency. She was renowned primarily as a photojournalist who produced a wide range of work internationally, published in magazines and books.

We are particularly celebrating the work she did in the film industry from the 50s to the 80s as an on-set photographer for over 40 films. Our first introduction to Arnold was her book on Marilyn Monroe which included images collected from the sessions they did from the mid 50s to the 60s. This led to us to publish an article in *Cineaction* focusing on Monroe's star image using a number of Arnold's photographs. What we found striking about Arnold's approach to the much photographed Marilyn Monroe was her intuitive understanding of the complexities of the Monroe image. She appreciated Monroe's ability to perform for the camera and collaborate in the process of creating a persona through a visual image.

Arnold established a bond of trust with stars such as Monroe and Joan Crawford. In part, this was the result of Arnold's

empathy for the stars she photographed as well as the non-exploitive approach evidenced in the images. Like the Monroe photos, Arnold's sessions with Joan Crawford produced an astonishing body of work. Crawford offered a behind the scenes look at the labour process involved in perfecting the final image of a movie star. Here too Arnold avoids stereotyping and exploiting the star's image, focusing instead on insights to the star as a hard working woman. Arnold's work strikes a balance between presenting an analysis of the process of construction involved in the creation of the persona, while at the same time offering a humanist perspective of that process.

Arnold's contribution to the cinema is perhaps most eloquently realized in *Marilyn Monroe: An Appreciation* (1981) and its second edition, *Marilyn Monroe* (2005) which contains twenty-eight additional photographs. Arnold speaks of the respect and affection she felt for Monroe, both as a person and an artist.

—Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe



Sylvana
Mangano



Joan
Crawford



Eve Arnold and Marilyn Monroe

Elizabeth Taylor

IN MEMORIAM 1932–2011

Elizabeth Taylor spent most of her life in the public eye; her status as a Hollywood actress was a part of the broader personality that also encompassed her iconic beauty, eight marriages (two of which were preceded by scandal) religious conversion, family, major illnesses, love of animals, political alliances and personal friendships, jewelry indulgences, that all produced 'Elizabeth Taylor' in the public domain.

Taylor's film career can be seen as dividing along the line of *Cleopatra* (1963) and the tumultuous relationship with Richard Burton. The pre-*Cleopatra* period includes Taylor as a child of the studio system who, at nineteen, makes *A Place in the Sun* (1951) a film that marks her entry into adulthood. She evolves into a sensuous, vivacious woman, and becomes labelled 'the most beautiful woman in the world'. This image defined Taylor into the early 60's.

In the latter half of the 50's, Taylor was a star whose persona challenged the stringent production code during a period of transition in which Hollywood was competing with television. Films such as *Giant* (1956), *Raintree County* (1957), *Cat on a Hot tin Roof* (1958), *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959) and *Butterfield 8* (1960), call attention to Taylor's physicality and incorporate a variety of identities simultaneously: mother, lover, sister, and friend.

Beginning with *Cleopatra* and the end of the classical cinema, Taylor becomes a superstar who commands an astronomical salary. The spectacle of her life takes on new meaning both

in terms of her love relationship with Richard Burton and the commodities associated with the celebrity lifestyle, *la dolce vita*. Taylor's life increasingly takes on a melodramatic existence defined by excess, which she defends without apology.

With the death of her friend Rock Hudson in the mid 80s, Taylor significantly becomes a spokesperson in support of finding a cure for AIDS, and aligns herself with an ostracized gay community. She retains this commitment until her death.

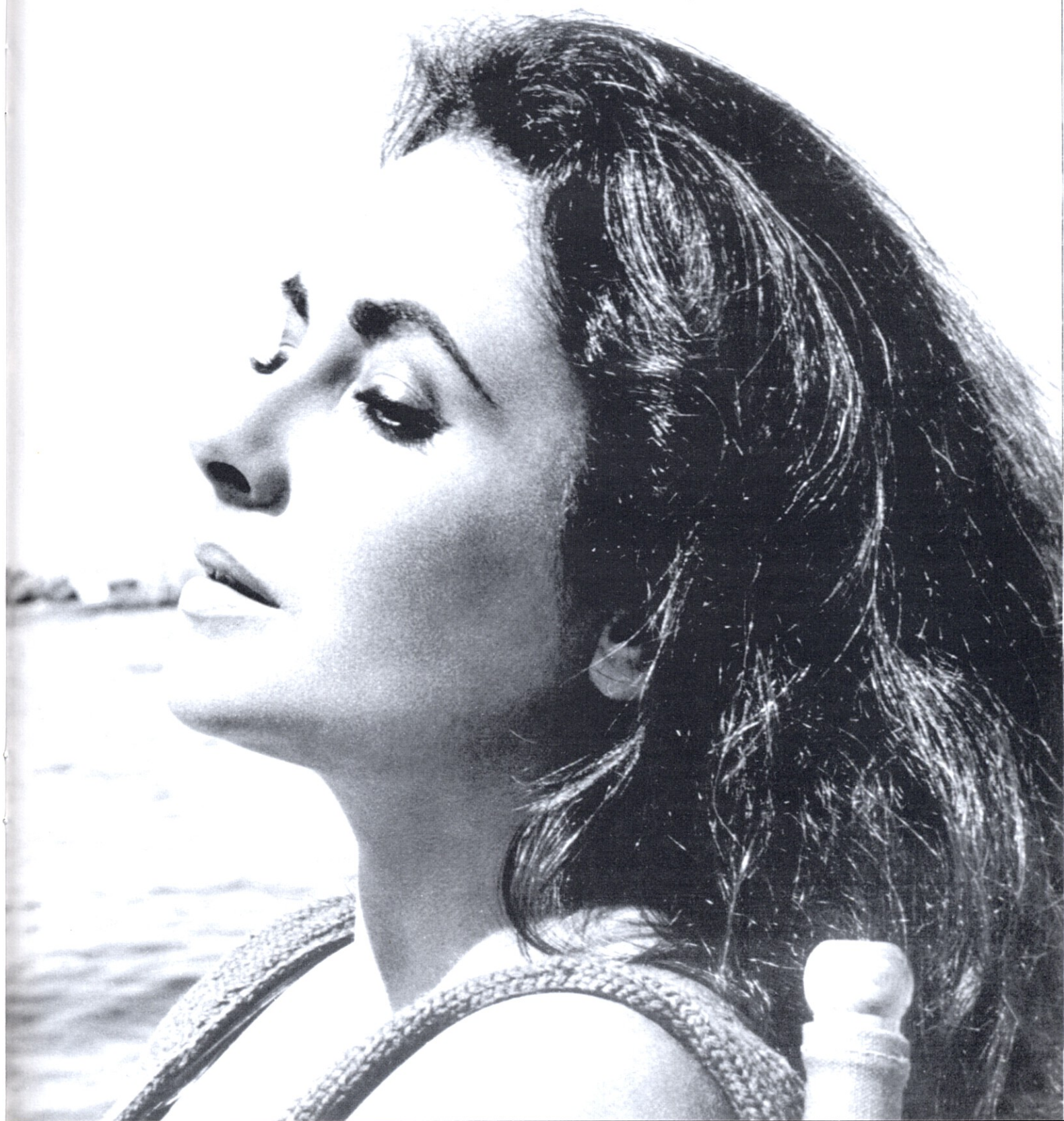
As her film career begins to recede in the late 80s, Taylor, being an astute businesswoman, presents herself as a marketable property, launching a series of perfumes with great success and, in the process, reinvents herself and her body.

Given the scope of Taylor's life, one might overlook Taylor's status and talent as an actor. Aside from winning two Best Actress Academy Awards, she was highly respected in her profession by other actors. Although she appeared on screen with some of the most renowned Method practitioners of her generation, James Dean, Paul Newman, Marlon Brando, Taylor never ascribed to a specific acting technique; instead, she suggested her acting was instinctive, often giving performances that were notable for their unguarded emotionalism.

Ultimately, Elizabeth Taylor's image is a humanist one and that is a great part of her appeal. She was courageous enough to publicly live out her vulnerable moments along with her great successes.

—Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe





Personal and Political Views

HOW ROBIN WOOD TAUGHT US HOW TO LIVE

The description of me (by one of the editorial board of *Screen* magazine) as an "unreconstructed humanist" was largely correct (I now aspire to be a reconstructed humanist).

—Robin Wood¹

By ALEXANDER JACOBY

There is a striking passage in the chapter on *Shame* in Robin Wood's book on Ingmar Bergman where analysis gives way to anecdote:

As I sit writing this there is a record of the Brandenburg Concertos on the gramophone, and I can see my children playing in the garden; men, women and children—families like mine—are being burnt and blasted to death in Vietnam, and I have absolutely no idea what may be happening to me and the few people I love ten years, five years, two months from now. *Shame* is central to the experience I am living at this moment, and at most moments.²

The passage encapsulates the writer's method: a personal experience is evoked, a response to art is framed in terms of its personal relevance, and the personal is related outwards to the political. It is, of course, a statement from the earlier, liberal humanist phase of Wood's career, when he was still a married husband and father, before he publicly acknowledged his homosexuality and gravitated toward Marxist feminism. But I would like to juxtapose this passage with a statement from Wood's work after that transition, dating from the last decade of his life.

A week ago, for the first time, I held in my arms my tiny grandson, Nicholas Gee-Ming [...] My head was full of Schubert's late string quintets, which I had been listening to somewhat obsessively [...] The two experiences merged, the music expressing so eloquently the beauty, the joy, the pain, the despair, of human existence, the new life in my arms so innocent (but is any of us born innocent?), so fragile, so impossibly tiny, so trusting... I cannot help wondering how he will fare in a world now controlled by the forces of domination and greed.³

In juxtaposing these two passages, written thirty-five years apart (the second is taken from the revised edition of *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, published in 2003), I hope to suggest an underlying unity in Wood's apparently diverse work. The recurrent elements are clear:

1. Classical music (Bach and Schubert), used to symbolise the

finer potentialities of human civilisation, a function which, in the first example, can be related directly to Wood's subsequent comments on *Shame*, a film whose protagonists are professional musicians, in which the husband, Jan, dreams of being able to play the Fourth Brandenburg Concerto again, and in which a Meissen musical ornament is a key symbolic prop, "embodying the concept of civilisation in its purest form".⁴

2. The family: the writer's commitment to and concern for his children in the first example and for his grandchild in the second, in both cases directly related to the theme of music (gramophone and children being evoked in the same sentence in the first passage, the two experiences of listening to music and holding a grandson explicitly "merging" in the second). And an awareness of the fragility of this bond, through the evocation of:
3. External destructive forces, now and in prospect: a specific conflict (Vietnam) in the first; the more generalised "forces of domination and greed" (which have, it should be acknowledged, been somewhat more precisely defined elsewhere in the chapter) in the second. In both cases, these forces are conceived explicitly as a threat to the writer's family, and, implicitly, to the values represented by Bach and Schubert (a connection also made by *Shame*; the orchestra in which Jan and Eva used to play has been shut down because of the war).

The similarity of these two passages, written at either end of Wood's career, may surprise some of his readers. The careers of numerous writers reveal changes in emphasis and ideology over time, but Wood is arguably unique among film critics for the rigour with which he charted his own personal and political evolution. Nevertheless, the passages quoted suggest a startling degree of consistency in the preoccupations of the earlier and the later Wood.

Also worthy of comment is a degree of *inconsistency within* Wood's later work. It may again surprise some readers to turn from Wood's warm tribute to his baby grandson to the following, some three hundred pages later:

All that needs to be discarded is our culture's obsession with biological parentage [...] Within our civilization, by far the largest portion of neurosis (with its concomitants of inhibition, repression, anxiety, generally stunt-



Sunrise (1927)



ed potential, and in the more extreme cases far more disastrous results) develops within the traditional family, passed on from generation to generation. Speaking personally, I certainly include myself in this, but I also include virtually everyone else with whom I have come into close contact throughout my life. The damage is irreparable: *Why do we want it to continue?*⁵

These comments are, of course, of a piece which the wide-ranging critique of the family which has partially structured Wood's work since the 1970s, going back to his perception that the classical Hollywood family comedy finds its modern equivalent in the horror film.⁶ But they seem at odds with the generous and heartfelt tribute to Wood's grandson cited above. This is not, of course, to suggest that Wood should have dissociated himself from his family in order to make a political point; it is simply to observe that there appears to be a tension between his professed ideology and his expressed feelings.

I make these points not in order to undermine Wood's writings, but to indicate some of the complexities in the narrative of his personal and political evolution. Now that his writings can be viewed as a whole, I think it is worth exploring the question of the extent to which his "conversion" to Marxist feminism constituted a decisive break, and the degree to which a coherent outlook can be detected throughout his work. In so doing, I hope to point both to the consistency and integrity of Wood's writings, and, using terminology that Wood favoured, to some of the "tensions and contradictions" within his work.

"Teaching Us How to Live": Criteria for Judgement

Personal Views, published in 1976, is a pivotal work in Wood's career. It seems reasonable to identify it as the last book from his earlier phase, when he still accepted the label of "unreconstructed humanist", and when his commitment to radical ideology had yet to cohere. But it also foreshadows the more conscious ideological perspective of his work in subsequent decades, no doubt in part because his sense of marginalisation in the academic film culture of the 1970s, dominated as it was by *Screen* and by a semiotic approach, obliged him to analyse the assumptions and values behind his own critical practice. In that book, Wood responded to the question posed by an unnamed friend, "Do you believe that works of art teach you how to live?" His response was suitably tentative. As he wrote:

Like most parodies, this bears a recognizable relation to what I actually *do* believe; in fact, it performs neatly enough parody's usual function of reducing an idea to a formulation so crude that it appears silly. No, I don't believe I learn "how to live" by looking at the *Virgin on the Rocks*, reading Donne's *Elegies* or listening to *Das Lied von der Erde*: if I did, I would exist in a state of acute and chronic confusion. On the other hand, I have been deeply affected by all of these, and presume them to have had some oblique, scarcely definable but potent influence on the development of my sensibility, on my way of thinking, feeling, perceiving, reacting; they have certainly extended and deepened my sense of the possibilities of human experience. Many works I greatly admire [...], far from "teaching me how to live"—with the overtones of moral edification the phrase suggests—have the primary effect of undermining any certainties I possess. And works that try to "teach me how to live," in some explicit, categorical manner [...], I tend to distrust, seeking ways to distance myself from their insistent persuasions.⁷

The judgement is remarkable for its poise, grace and clarity.

A potential educative role for the arts is acknowledged, but that role, Wood suggests, is necessarily indirect; one does not go to the arts to absorb specific moral precepts, but for their broader shaping influence on one's personality. The corollary of this is that it is possible for a work of art to be ideologically objectionable, yet still admirable—an implication that Wood made explicit in his remarks later in the book about *Anna Karenina*: "The fact that a book I find increasingly questionable ideologically continues to affect me as among the half-dozen greatest works of art in my experience, neither troubles me nor strikes me as paradoxical."⁸

Twenty-five years later, when Wood wrote the preface to the most recent edition of *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, his emphasis had shifted markedly. The practice of criticism was itself seen as a means of "insistent persuasion". "I now see the practice of film criticism not only as a means of elucidating film," he wrote, "but as a means of encouraging—indeed, *demanding*—political and social change: of insisting on the necessity, today, for the most extreme leftist radicalism short of physical violence."⁹ Tania Modleski, in her book on Hitchcock (*The Women Who Knew Too Much*), defined the transition by stating that "for Wood, political 'progressiveness' has come to replace moral complexity as the criterion by which to judge."¹⁰ This, however, is arguably an oversimplification. Some of Wood's criteria had indeed changed; most of his criteria, however, had been *redefined*, and, in the process, the notion of "extend[ing] and deepen[ing] our" sense of the possibilities of human experience" had been given a more precise and specifically political dimension.

Wood himself succinctly defined the original influences on his work in the "Retrospective" to the 1977 edition of *Hitchcock's Films*. "The impetus behind the book," he wrote, "sprang from two heterogeneous sources 'yoked by violence together': Dr. Leavis and *Cahiers du Cinéma*; its originality is perhaps most readily explainable in terms of this fusion of apparent incompatibles."¹¹ To these influences may be added the British journal *Movie*, to which Wood was an early contributor, and (the key influence on his writings during the last three decades of his career), his student, colleague and close friend, Andrew Britton, an avowed Marxist whose criticism combined detailed textual analysis with a degree of theoretical rigour which Wood's own writing admittedly lacked.

Although Wood's first published essay, on *Psycho*, appeared in *Cahiers*, the influence of that journal is arguably the most superficial, except in so far as Wood shared its aim of demonstrating that certain products of the commercial cinema could be taken seriously as works of art (hence the famous opening sentence of *Hitchcock's Films*, "Why should we take Hitchcock seriously?").¹² The kinship with *Movie* is clearer, but not untroubled. Wood shared with the first generation of *Movie* critics a dedication to close analysis, but distrusted their reluctance to *evaluate* works.¹³

The influence of F.R. Leavis seems at all stages of Wood's career more central. Though the Cambridge critic is mentioned by name once only in the original edition of *Hitchcock's Films*, a Leavisian approach is implicit throughout in the tone, vocabulary and overall moral emphasis of the book, as well as in the evocation of writers favoured by Leavis, such as Blake, Conrad and Lawrence.¹⁴ This influence was explicitly acknowledged in the "general indebtedness" Wood expressed to Leavis in his early book on Howard Hawks, and is detectable in the subsequent books on Ingmar Bergman, Arthur Penn and Satyajit Ray.¹⁵ Wood's political conversion, on which Andrew Britton

was the central and defining influence, did not militate against the continuing relevance of Leavis, to which Wood's own comments in the later phase of his career bear explicit witness. There is the reaffirmation, in the 1977 edition of *Hitchcock's Films*, of Leavis' "continuing influence" on his work; the championship, in the introduction to the 1989 *Hitchcock's Film Revisited*, of his ongoing importance as "a critic and thinker who stood, above all, for 'life'";¹⁶ the repetition of his definition of the ideal critical exchange ("This is so, isn't it?"/"Yes, but...") in Wood's late monograph on *Rio Bravo*.¹⁷ In 1989, Wood made it clear that Leavis remained a model for his own critical practice despite growing political differences, and asserted the continuing relevance of Leavis' approach to a Marxist feminist aesthetic:

My own experience has been that a radical change in ideological position has had little effect on which films I value but a fairly drastic effect on why I value them. The implication is that there are levels of creativity (for the artist) and of evaluation (for the critic) that transcend ideological difference: precisely, the levels indicated by the Leavisian key words such as seriousness, intelligence, complexity. What changes is not so much one's awareness of the presence or absence of such qualities, but one's awareness of how they are manifested—of how an artist's seriousness and intelligence not only produce statements about 'the human condition' but involve him or her inevitably in the movement of culture and the conflicts within it. My commitment to Marxism and feminism has revealed entire new levels of meaning, and new possibilities of interpretation, in films like *La Règle du Jeu*, *Blonde Venus*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Tokyo Story*, that were previously closed to me.¹⁸

In a sense, Wood's continuing commitment to Leavis, despite the literary critic's avowed anti-Marxism, is unsurprising, since even in his early work his relationship with the literary critic had not been derivative. As he aptly noted, "I automatically parted company with the 'pure' Leavis position when I began writing on the Hollywood cinema".¹⁹ Indeed, it may be argued that Wood's decision in the 1960s to apply Leavisian principles to popular culture was as striking a departure from his mentor's critical practice as was his political transition in the 1970s. Consequently, it is perhaps fitting that this transition involved not an abandonment of the Leavisian values of "seriousness", "intelligence", and "complexity", but a revaluation of them: Wood came to believe that those values had, inevitably, a political implication. By 1986, in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, he was willing to identify "seriousness", as essentially political in import: "It will be noted that I have annexed, in a manner that may seem surreptitious, 'seriousness' to 'radicalism'. I have to admit that for me the two are becoming increasingly inseparable."²⁰

The fruit of this change in attitude is the sequence of politically informed reinterpretations of canonical films prefigured by the seminal 'Ideology, Genre, Auteur' (collected in *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, but first written as early as 1976) and including suggestive Marxist feminist accounts of films by such canonical figures as Ozu, Ophüls and Hitchcock, artists whose work he continued to value highly throughout his career. However, the claim that "a radical change in ideological position has had little effect on which films I value" is only partially true, and Wood's political evolution is arguably best illustrated by an examination of his changing evaluations of some of the films and filmmakers that he came latterly to repudiate.

Ingmar Bergman is a case in point. In his seminal 1978 essay

'Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic' (collected in the most recent edition of *Personal Views*), Wood wrote of his "extraordinarily intense" identification, while still a married husband and father and closeted homosexual in the late 1960s, with the "anguish and desperation that Bergman's films so compellingly communicate", which he, like Bergman, "accept[ed]... as unchangeable, as 'the human condition.'" ²¹ By 1978, "this tendency of the films to impose themselves as 'the human condition', and the concomitant "lack of an explicit social-political dimension to Bergman's work", had become grounds for a negative judgement of the director. ²² This critical attitude is followed up in Wood's later writings on Bergman, in particular the essay on *Persona* included in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*: there, Wood complains that the film's last third "mercilessly reimposes" the "ideology of the Human Condition" which in its first half, he had come close to challenging. ²³

I would like to explore the way in which Wood's political evolution affected his estimation of certain films in greater detail by analysing his response to a canonical film which he discussed more than once, in different phases of his career: F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise*. Wood's response to it seems always to have been qualified; in 1976, in *Personal Views*, he had already criticised its "partial incoherence". ²⁴ Discussing the comic elements in the central funfair sequence, he remarked that "their thematic relevance is vague and tenuous, and [...] the sense of a rich and significant interrelatedness diminishes"; moreover, "it is difficult to see any significant relationship between the 'Woman of the City' and the city itself." ²⁵ Nevertheless, evoking the film's other virtues—its visual beauty, thematic complexity and superb acting—he concluded, "I value [...] *Sunrise* above thousands of perfectly coherent works of less density and power." ²⁶

Despite Wood's reservations, the attitude to the film is here on balance positive, and the terms of praise are, on the whole, ideologically neutral. "Visual beauty" and "superb acting" are essentially aesthetic criteria, which might be accepted by critics of the right or left; the same claim might be made for the "rich and significant interrelatedness" (terminology derived directly from Lawrence and Leavis) that Wood detects in the film's best sections. In an earlier article on the film (published in *Film Comment* in the same year as *Personal Views*, but written some years before), Wood had praised the film's "affirmation of human wholeness achieved through marriage and family", and this admittedly does have clear ideological implications. ²⁷ But approval of the film's politics was not given as the main reason to admire it; in fact, as Wood argued in the context of Godard's *Vent d'Est*, one might disapprove of a film's politics, yet still "take pleasure in its organization of complexities, its internal relationships, its coherence." ²⁸

When Wood wrote on *Sunrise* again in the nineties, in an essay included in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, the emphasis was reversed. Accusations of incoherence constituted a secondary, albeit severe, line of attack, Wood arguing that "as a coherent statement, the film is very seriously flawed, its project weakened by a number of demonstrable failures, confusions and compromises." ²⁹ But his critique of the film was primarily political: the drama, with its "eloquent hymn to home and hearth, heterosexual marriage and family", was "an enactment of repression", and the ideological project was "utterly banal". ³⁰ Murnau's film was valuable less as art than as evidence, "provid[ing] marvellous material for studying the process whereby ideology is universalized, idealized and naturalized." ³¹ The shift in emphasis may be fairly summed up by Wood's overall evaluation of the film: essen-

tially admiring, despite reservations, in 1976; largely critical, despite intermittent praise, in 1998.

The political development which this critical transition embodies has elicited mixed reactions. Latterly, Wood professed himself bewildered by responses from both critics and friends which sought to separate his analyses from their socio-political context. As he complained:

Everything I have written from *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* onwards seems to me characterized and structured by my political position, so that it should be impossible to separate the aesthetics from the politics (in which I include of course sexual politics), the analyses from the radical attitude that animates and pervades them: if you accept one, you accept the other. ³²

My response to this is somewhat complex. The claim that Wood's later interpretations are structured by his political position seems to me unchallengeable. It is not merely that the interpretations make sense in the light of Wood's politics, but that the political claims are themselves substantiated by the interpretations. For instance, Wood opened the chapter 'From Buddies to Lovers' in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* with a demand for the "recognition and acceptance of constitutional bisexuality," and followed this up with a wry admission that "the reader who cannot entertain this proposition, at least as a working hypothesis, is going to have great difficulty with much of the remainder of this book." ³³ But the point is that the hypothesis is justified by the evidence of the films. Wood's theory of constitutional bisexuality, and the traditional masculine need to disavow this, explains the prevalence of "buddy" movies in the context of the sexual and ideological uncertainties of the 1970s (in particular, the disintegration of so-called "'normality': the heterosexual romance, monogamy, the family, the perpetuation of the status quo, the Law of the Father"). ³⁴ It provides a rationale for the recurrent trope in these films of the tragic ending ("They are also the protagonists of films made within an overwhelmingly patriarchal industry: hence they must finally be definitively separated"). ³⁵ And it suggests reasons for the disappearance of the cycle in the 1980s (the implicit, or repressed, "male love story" was replaced by films which explicitly concern themselves with homosexuality, albeit safely, according to the norms of liberal bourgeois ideology). In other words, Wood's later critical practice was to seek support for his ideological position in the empirical evidence of the films. If one wishes to reject his political assumptions, one does, at least, have a critical duty to try to formulate alternative explanations for the phenomena he describes.

On the other hand, the adequacy of Wood's specific political prescriptions is open to question. The later work is sometimes characterised by a stridency of diction, a reliance on apocalyptic terminology (which admittedly, in the context of growing environmental perils and the ongoing threat of nuclear war, does not seem entirely unreasonable), and a simplified opposition between "Life" and "what I can only call, albeit melodramatically, the forces of evil". ³⁶ Reading these arguments, it is perhaps not unreasonable to cite Wood's own earlier comments on the later Leavis, able "to believe [...] only with an obvious effort of will (disillusionment and desperation can be felt lurking just below the surface of the argument, threatening its poise, provoking its tendency to repetitiveness and over-insistence), that his ideal was somehow realizable." ³⁷

The point is not that Wood's arguments are untenable, but that they are unbalanced. His complaints about the way in which our schools and universities have been comprehensively



Sancho Dayu (1954)

undermined because “capitalism demands that any genuinely and intrinsically valuable education be replaced by career training” have a partial validity, and may, indeed, be more fully valid in the context of North American educational institutions, of which I have no first-hand experience;³⁸ but the Cambridge that I attended in the late 1990s was little changed from the model that Wood recalls admiringly from the early 1950s; and my experience teaching in another, less ancient British university suggests that at least some students and staff retain the idea that education has an intrinsic value. Likewise, the advances in women’s rights and gay rights over the last forty years have not been entirely smooth (there have been setbacks), but they are real, and perhaps merit more than Wood’s very grudging acknowledgement. Thus, his response to the legalisation of gay marriage (a concrete progressive development) is to ask why homosexuals would want to marry at all, to which the obvious answer is that marriage may serve many purposes other than “making it more difficult to split up if you’re miserable”, and that, even if it is historically a conservative institution, it may be susceptible to progressive redefinition.³⁹

Nor is there any acknowledgement in Wood’s work that the liberalisation of sexual mores which has contributed to the growing acceptance of homosexuality could not have come about in the culture that produced Mozart or Ophüls or Leavis, and that it is at least partially in keeping with the ideology of modern liberal capitalism, which validates “lifestyle choice” as a form of “consumer choice”. This is not, of course, to deny that

pro-capitalist interests in the West have frequently allied themselves with social conservatives, or that gay liberation has had, and continues to have, its revolutionary potential, but it is, I think, to suggest that politics is less Manichean than Wood would have us believe.

Mizoguchi Answers Yo-Yo Ma: Art and Politics

It is worth stressing that a key component of Wood’s opposition to capitalist culture and indeed, to the university in its modern form lies in its hostility and/or indifference to the arts, since “it is only through training in the Arts that the crucial process of learning can take place: the process whereby we can learn simultaneously to *think* and *feel*, the process of becoming fully human.”⁴⁰ This claim (which is somewhat presumptuous; are we to assume that students who opt for science majors are less than fully human?) leads logically to Wood’s controversial presentation of the artist as a paradigm of achieved human potential. Thus, in an essay on fascism and cinema, Wood ends by offering the cellist Yo-Yo Ma as an “exemplary” anti-fascist figure. On the basis both of his “technical mastery” and of his “openness and generosity of spirit”, Wood proclaims him “a perfect paradigm of the human being in his/her fully creative flowering, from which all taint of the fascist mindset is totally absent.”⁴¹

This is a problematic formulation, and its naivety was aptly suggested by another avowedly leftist critic, Christopher Sharrett, who pointed to Ma’s participation in a concert at the

2002 National Humanities Medal Ceremony, where he played a duet with Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State in the right-wing Bush administration, the policies of which were evidently antithetical to Wood's values. Sharrett argued that "Wood's praise of the cellist seems to take for granted Yo-Yo Ma's political worldview solely on the basis of his artistic accomplishment, and an attendant congeniality that can hardly be accepted as an index of his humanity."⁴²

This is not to accuse Wood of overlooking the possibility that a training in the arts need not equate to political awareness. His comments in praise of the cellist date from several years before 2002, and Sharrett himself goes on to assert that "Wood would not hesitate to analyse the Yo-Yo Ma performance and its implications."⁴³ Moreover, as Sharrett acknowledges, Wood had explicitly disavowed a simplistic equation between artistic accomplishment and humane values in an earlier phase of his career. In *Personal Views*, he responded to George Steiner's assertion that "we have very little solid evidence that literary studies do very much to enrich or stabilize moral perception, that they *humanize*," and to the much-cited claim "that concentration camp commandants would come home after work in the evenings and play Schubert exquisitely on the piano". While Wood admits that "it is naive in the extreme to argue that contact with the arts in itself refines, ennobles or humanizes", he argues that the problem lies in "the treatment of art as something out there, external to the individual, to the values by which he lives (as opposed to the values to which he pays lip service), the way he thinks and feels from moment to moment in his daily life, in his social activities, his work, his personal relationships."⁴⁴ In a formulation as relevant to his later Marxist feminist position as to his earlier liberal humanist one, Wood claims that art ceases to humanise as soon as its appreciation is divorced from its function.

The film that Wood cites specifically as a reply to Steiner is Mizoguchi's *Sansho Dayu*, a work that he continued to admire through all phases of his career (he was to comment in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film* that the "very high valuation" of Mizoguchi's late *jidai-geki*, especially *Sansho* and *Ugetsu Monogatari*, "still stands, and is in fact unassailable").⁴⁵ Mizoguchi, Wood argues, warns specifically against a purely aesthetic response to art through a scene in which the bailiff of the title, who has been placed in charge of a labour camp, arranges "a display of high culture in the form of traditional song and dance" for the benefit of a visiting bureaucrat.⁴⁶ The scene, in which art is presented as a mere aesthetic spectacle, divorced from moral and political contexts, triggers the outraged departure from the camp of the bailiff's humane son, Taro, but as Wood goes on to observe, "Mizoguchi's answer to Steiner is not that one scene, but the whole film," which "embodies the concept of humanity that it upholds, implying an attitude to art and a sense of its function very different from *Sansho*'s."⁴⁷

In addition to these comments, Wood wrote a more extensive critical analysis of the film in the 1970s, initially for *Film Comment*; that essay too was included in *Personal Views*. It is one of his finest essays, as befits one of the cinema's greatest achievements. A recurrent concern is with the unity of the aesthetic and the political—one cannot separate what a film says from how it says it. "Style in *Sansho Dayu*," Wood observes, "is the convincing embodiment of the cinema's supreme intelligence and sensibility."⁴⁸ He cites, as an example, the sequence in which the children are kidnapped at the lakeside. Mizoguchi's use here of long shot and deep focus cannot be

separated from the meaning of the scene: "The style here implies the essential theme of the film, the tension between physical separation and spiritual unity, the family forcibly held apart yet united by Mizoguchi within the frame."⁴⁹ This is one of the most economical pieces of film criticism I know: it offers, in one sentence, a verbal elucidation of the emotional and philosophical effect of an image; it clarifies the meaning and function of something that the viewer, as he or she watches the scene, *feels* intensely.

The central subject of this scene, as of the film as a whole, is human suffering; Mizoguchi's main concern in *Sansho Dayu* is to investigate what might be the proper response, on aesthetic, political and human levels (the three necessarily intertwined), to such suffering. It is significant, perhaps, that Wood chose to write about *Sansho Dayu* in the mid-1970s, at a time when he still approached film from a broadly liberal humanist perspective, but when he was moving towards a commitment to revolutionary ideology; the politics of Mizoguchi's film are, similarly, poised between the liberal and the revolutionary. Zushio's growth into political commitment motivates a revolutionary act—his destruction of Sansho's concentration camp, and liberation of its slaves—and is evidently celebrated. But, in accepting ministerial authority in order to demolish Sansho's power, he nevertheless works through existing institutions (and it is the corollary of this that the overall social impact of his action is somewhat restricted). Nor is his triumph over the bailiff privileged, structurally or stylistically, in quite the same way as is his ultimate search for and reunion with his mother, which constitutes the film's exquisitely affecting conclusion, and which can only occur after he has renounced worldly authority. Wood wrote that "the treatment of authority and rebellion in the film is characteristically complex and comprehensive":

The attitude to Zushio's action, while complex, is very precisely defined. He achieves no widespread transformation of society, and the implications of his resignation are, on the socio-political level, extremely pessimistic; yet his action destroys one petty tyranny, ends the 'earthly hell' of Sansho's estate, makes more bearable the lives of a few individuals. His revolutionary gesture, therefore, is presented as neither futile nor reprehensible [...But] the final emphasis is less on the limited social good Zushio has achieved than on the personal integrity, the triumph of humane feeling, the achievement confirms. The apparently very different endings of *Ugetsu*, *Sansho* and *Shin Heike* [...] are consistent in their emphasis on self-determination within the available possibilities—on the protagonist's achievement of awareness of the world, awareness of self, on his definition of his own identity.⁵⁰

Sansho Dayu is too complex a film to be reduced to a single message, but this final emphasis on personal integrity arguably has a universal application. It is difficult to conceive of a situation in which "self-determination within the available possibilities", or the "achievement of awareness", would not be things to be striven for. It is characteristic of Wood's writing at this time, and earlier, to focus on the universals. Had he written on *Sansho Dayu* in the 1980s or 1990s, he would no doubt have produced a more explicitly ideological account, suggesting the implications of that "achievement of awareness" for our contemporary situation.

The film, certainly, would richly repay such an approach. For all its ostensible universality, *Sansho Dayu* is relevant *now*, its particular relevance shifting with the decades. The film is set in the distant past, and an ironic opening title places it in "an age

'before mankind awoke from barbarism'"⁵¹. Viewed from the vantage point of 1954, it is a supremely compassionate response to the atrocities that had taken place in then very recent years, in Japan and elsewhere. Seen in the context of Wood's later writings, it has other resonances. Zushio's temporary brutalisation, when he becomes one of Sansho's henchmen in the concentration camp, is one of the film's most relevant aspects. In 1976, Wood had described it, with trenchant irony, as his "submission to a 'realistic' attitude to his situation."⁵² It is this notion of "realism" to which Wood's later work was sharply opposed, both in his advocacy of socialist revolution, and in his championship of the value of the university not as a mere stage in training for employment, but as, in Leavisian terms, the "creative centre of civilisation":

The educational system is deeply implicated in the requirements and ethos of consumer capitalism; so, too, are the universities' administrators (who will tell you that "we must attract students in a heavily competitive world"), their teachers (who will tell you that "we have to compromise if we are to keep students in our classes"), their students (who will tell you that "we have to prepare ourselves to find jobs, we must face reality"—i.e., move from one form of prostitution to another). All this is known familiarly as "being realistic about things."⁵³

The relevance of *Sansho Dayu* to this is clear; Zushio allows himself to be brutalised because he can see no "realistic" alternative to his acquiescence in the norms of the society he inhabits. While Wood evidently would not have equated modern capitalist society with the totalitarian state depicted by Mizoguchi—he insisted, fairly, that "we cannot (except as polemical hyperbole) call our current right-wing governments fascist"⁵⁴—the implications of Zushio's initial acquiescence and later rebellion are transferable to any society which is so structured as to restrict or limit the development of human potential. Mizoguchi's film is a call to find alternatives, just as the determination to seek alternative ways of life, alternative social and political arrangements, is the value and distinction of Wood's later criticism.

These comments may, I hope, shed light on the degree to which Wood's criticism can remain valid and valuable if one does not share all of his specific political assumptions. If it is true, as both Wood himself and I have argued, that his later criticism is inseparable from the ideology that informs it, it remains the case that the particular solutions he proposes are both less integrated and more tentative (he explicitly stated, on more than one occasion, that he was not a political philosopher).⁵⁵ It is surely tenable to accept the values embodied in his criticism while contesting his specific proposals, so long as one is willing to seek what one might call alternatives to his alternatives. Wood was not an orthodox Marxist: he wrote of the need for "a Marxism crossed with feminism, incorporating a rethought humanism."⁵⁶ One can engage fully and productively with his later criticism (in the spirit of "This is so, isn't it?" "Yes, but...") provided that one accepts that our society and our culture are in need of reform, and is willing to think seriously about how that reform can be achieved.

In the final analysis, however, I cannot help feeling that there are aspects of Wood's criticism which, like those "Leavisian key words such as seriousness, intelligence, complexity", do finally "transcend ideological difference". Wood's later writing was explicitly political, but it was not *only* political. The true scope of his writings must be defined by the body of readers who have found in them not only persuasive interpretations of films,

not only a call to reform or revolution, but also, in their author's personal and political development, in the change from "unreconstructed" to "reconstructed" humanist, a model of a life lived with the fullest possible integrity—who have found that the work of Robin Wood has played a part in teaching them how to live.

Notes

- 1 Wood, Robin: *Hitchcock's Films Revisited: Revised Edition* (2002, Columbia University Press, New York), p358.
- 2 Wood, Robin: *Ingmar Bergman* (1969, Studio Vista, London), p174.
- 3 Wood: *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond* (2003, Columbia University Press, New York, p. xlv-xlv).
- 4 Wood, Robin: *Ingmar Bergman*, p176.
- 5 Wood: *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond*, p307.
- 6 For a statement of this position, see Wood: 'Return of the Repressed', in *Film Comment*, Vol 14, No 4 (July / Aug, 1978), pp25-32 (p29).
- 7 Wood: *Personal Views: Explorations in Film: Revised Edition* (2006, Wayne State University Press, Detroit), pp19-20.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p117.
- 9 Wood: *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, p.xxxiii.
- 10 Modleski, Tania: *The Women Who Knew Too Much* (1989, Routledge, Chapman and Hall, New York), p3.
- 11 Wood: *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, p206.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p55.
- 13 For a fuller discussion of Wood's relationship with *Movie*, see his exposition in *Personal Views*, p340.
- 14 For the direct reference to Leavis, in the chapter in *Vertigo*, see *Hitchcock's Film Revisited*, p164. For references to Blake, Conrad and Lawrence, see p123; p150; pp170-171.
- 15 Wood: *Howard Hawks* (1968, Martin Secker and Warburg, London), p200.
- 16 Wood: *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, p206; p29.
- 17 Wood: *Rio Bravo* (2003, British Film Institute, London), p8.
- 18 Wood: *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, pp42-43.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p40.
- 20 Wood: *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond*, p8.
- 21 Wood: *Personal Views*, p399.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Wood: *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film* (1998, Columbia University Press, New York), p261.
- 24 Wood: *Personal Views*, p29.
- 25 *ibid.*, p29.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p30.
- 27 Wood: 'Murnau's Midnight and Sunrise', in *Film Comment*: Vol 12, No 3 (May-June 1976), pp4-19 (p.15).
- 28 Wood: *Personal Views*, p88.
- 29 Wood: *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, p39.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p43; p42; p39.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p43.
- 32 Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond*, p. xvi.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p198.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p205.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.
- 37 Wood: *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, p38.
- 38 Wood: *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond*, p315.
- 39 Wood: *Personal Views*, p13.
- 40 Wood: *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond*, pp318-19.
- 41 Wood: *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, pp27-28.
- 42 Sharrett, Christopher: 'Haneke and the Discontents of European Culture', in *On Michael Haneke* (ed. Brian Price and John David Rhodes, 2010, Wayne State University Press, Detroit), pp207-219 (p208).
- 43 *Ibid.*, p208.
- 44 Wood, *Personal Views*, p51.
- 45 Wood: *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, p239.
- 46 Wood, *Personal Views*, p52.
- 47 Wood, *Personal Views*, p53.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p301.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p281.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p295-296.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p52.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p53.
- 53 Wood: *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, p37.
- 54 Wood: *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, p22.
- 55 See, for instance, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond*, p.xxix.
- 56 *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, p15.

Sweeter Still

SWEET MOVIE REVISITED

By ADAM BALIVET

In the early 1970s, Robin Wood wrote the entry on Dusan Makavejev in Richard Roud's *Cinema: a Critical Dictionary*, hailing Makavejev's films as "among the most immediately striking and original of the post-New Wave generation."¹ In particular, Wood commended the filmmaker's unique collage method and the challenge it presents to viewers—at least in his first two films—before expressing concern over the unwieldy, hyper-realized *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971). Two events took place after the writing of this piece: Makavejev made the (even more) controversial *Sweet Movie* (1974), and Wood's criticism took a politically radical turn. These two events, though occurring independently, deserve to be reevaluated with respect to each other, and to their possible intersections. This essay will first look at *Sweet Movie* in the light of Wood's initial thoughts on Makavejev, and then discuss the film under the more radical perspective of Wood's later criticism. The motive throughout is to discover how the two elements encourage each other and what that interaction can accomplish in terms of radical cinema.

In his assessment of Makavejev, Wood focuses most positively on the distinct style of montage that Makavejev has become well known for: "His particular contribution to the expressive potentialities of modern cinema has been the development of an increasingly complicated collage method: the juxtaposition of heterogeneous materials to produce complex ironies and ambiguities." This style involves the interweaving of fiction, non-fiction, scripted scenes, documentary clips, stock footage—and seemingly, anything that Makavejev deems fit—in what comes across as an instinctual manner. In other words, he relies less on rhythm and cohesion, more on natural timing and effect. Indeed, as Wood points out, "the possible connections are themselves ambiguous or contradictory, so that the spectator is forced into an active participation, invited to supply his own synthesis to the dialectic of thesis and antithesis proposed by the film." He sees the effect as twofold: to create the active participation described above (and illustrated by the out-of-order chronology of *Love Affair, or the Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator*, 1967), and to raise questions on the director's own behalf, to create an active dialogue—over morals, culture, politics, etc.—for which Makavejev himself has no definitive answers.

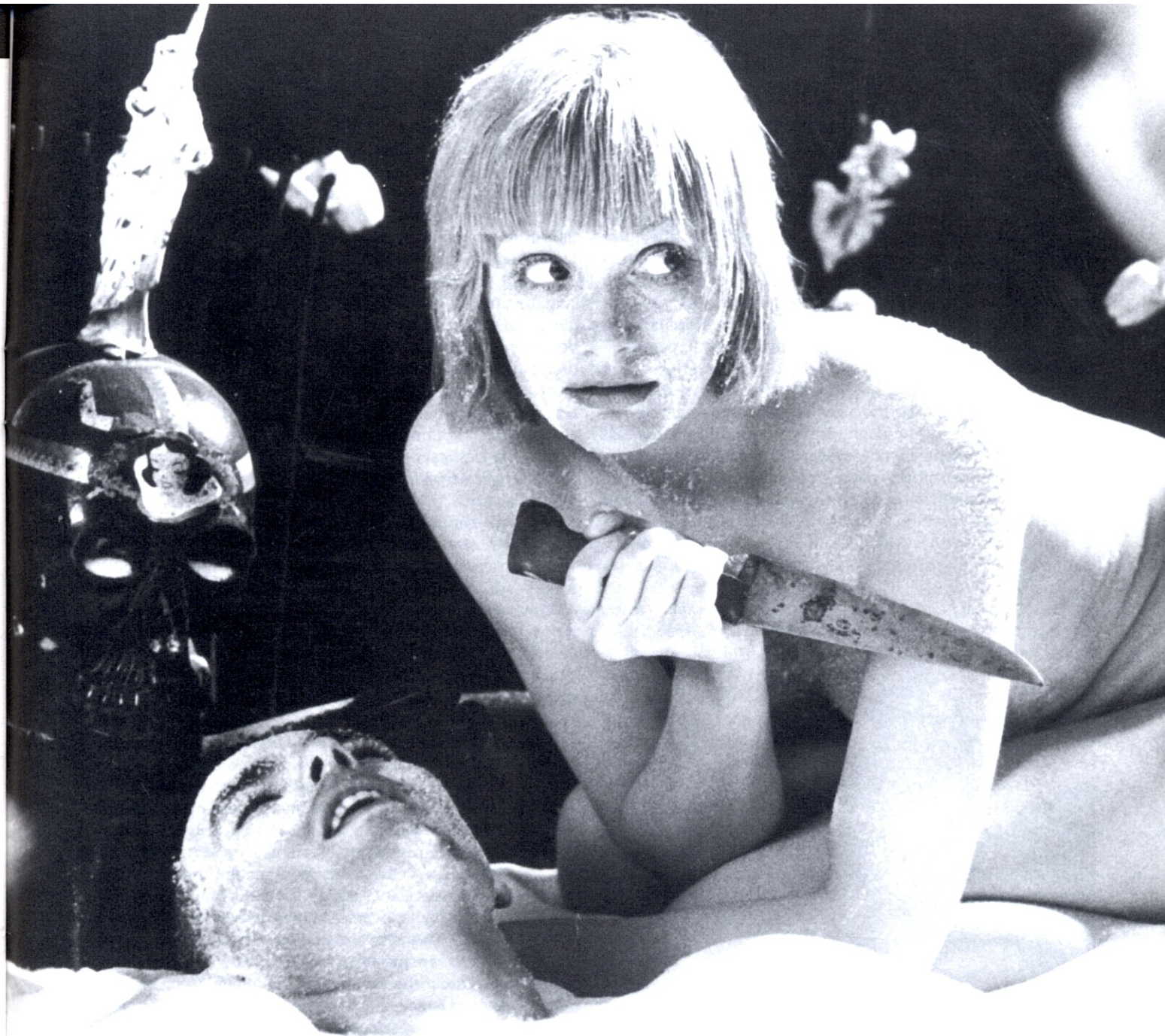
Wood makes the case for this active, consciousness-raising style of filmmaking primarily through *Love Affair* and its predecessor, *Man Is Not a Bird* (1965). Moving onto Makavejev's fourth film, *WR*, Wood begins to voice concerns with the direc-

tion in which the filmmaker takes his technique, particularly the differences in direction. The first difference he brings up is the much wider pool of resources Makavejev makes use of in *WR*: "The material drawn together for the collage is much more diverse, which at once multiplies the possibilities of meaning, irony and collision, and makes the effects much harder to control." Truly, *WR* brings together a much greater number of varying elements—subjects, genres, documentaries (both original and found), etc.—than Makavejev's previous films. As Wood concedes, "It could be argued that this encourages a still more active participation;" which other critics have, but in his view, "it is more likely to lead to vagueness."

He mentions the second and third differences in tandem: "in place of the meticulously detailed, sensitively observed 'realist' fictions of the first two films, *WR* offers a stylized, mostly comic charade which recapitulates their thematic while largely denying the audience the sympathetic involvement that (repeatedly interrupted and interrogated) generated such intensity of response." The third difference, then, is the shift to support more "progressive" attitudes, in opposition to "traditional" ones, in what Wood views as a satire of both attitudes, compared to the sympathetic portrayal of "traditional" characters in the early films. Wood also finds the treatment of *WR*'s subject (or one of them), Wilhelm Reich, "very disturbing," and this has been argued by critics as well, but although Reich may play a "spiritual" part in *Sweet Movie*, that topic is slightly out of the scope of this essay.

In the postscript to Wood's piece, Richard Roud carries the critique over to Makavejev's next film: "Wood's doubts about Makavejev were dramatically confirmed in *Sweet Movie* (1974), a critical disaster, and a film which has hardly been seen anywhere." The fact that the film had a very difficult time finding distribution, due partly to what Roud interprets as "opportunistic vulgarity," may have had more to do with its lack of critical success than any other factor. (To my knowledge, Wood has written nothing about *Sweet Movie*.) But whatever specific qualms Roud had with the film—since this is just a postscript, it does not go into detail—his point of it specifically confirming "Wood's doubts" must be debated.

Wood's first main criticism of *WR* has to do with the diversity and scope of "material" drawn from, which in that film includes everything from scripted fiction to "man on the street" interviews to Cinéma vérité; it feels more like an essay film. *Sweet Movie*, though narratively and geographically all over the



Sweet Movie

place, makes a collage of basically only two stories: Miss Canada/Miss Monde 1984 (Carole Laure) in her travels and encounters, and Anna Planeta (Anna Prucnal) and Luv Bakunin/Potemkin's (Pierre Clémenti) ill-fated river trip on the ship "Survival." (One notable exception is the controversial use of footage shot after the Katyn massacre, typically augmented by Makavejev with the use of folk music.) These two elements boil down to the experiences of two different women in the world—one more aligned with a capitalist society, one more oriented to a socialist outlook. Thus we have a potent juxtaposition of essentially two basic sources—much more focused than *WR*—simple in composition, though not necessarily so in narrative or message.

Wood's contention that with *WR*, Makavejev moves away from realism to a more "stylized, mostly comic charade" is not entirely refuted by *Sweet Movie*; it's difficult to lay claim to real-

ism in a narrative in which a billionaire character named Mr. Kapital (John Vernon) wins the virginity of Miss World 1984, who eventually gets shipped on a plane in a red suitcase to Paris, and goes from there. However, when we consider Wood's point about the *aim* of the comic satire—"the balancing of 'traditional' and 'progressive' attitudes is in *WR* decisively tipped in favour of the latter (which doesn't mean that its heroine's 'emancipated', free-fucking morality is simply endorsed: on the contrary, it is presented satirically)"—the issue becomes more complicated. In *Sweet Movie*, there do exist "sensitively observed 'realist' fictions," and they occur almost entirely in the "progressive" aspects of the narrative. Witness the love affair between Anna Planeta and Luv Bakunin. Beyond the historical names and socialist references, they come together as a result of mutually realized passions, both for revolution and for love. As Luv says, "Let's be realistic and demand the impossible."

Even in the narrative of the mostly “traditional” *Miss Monde*, the most tender and natural moments occur in the most “progressive” atmosphere, in the commune scene, when Miss Monde first gets nursed back to health, and then caresses (the penis of) one of the commune members.

If we do see a full shift in emphasis and sympathy from the “traditional” characters in Makavejev’s early films to the “progressive” elements in *Sweet Movie*, what does this indicate in terms of a radical concept of cinema? What importance does a pro-radical focus have in the greater terrain? Necessary to consider when answering these questions in this context (Makavejev and Wood) is Wood’s personal shift to a more radical film criticism.

Lorraine Mortimer, after quoting Bart Testa on the commune scene as being “disproportionately long and extremely powerful in its vulgarity and humanity,” places Wood in the context of his early 1970s reading of Makavejev: “Testa’s comments are part of an argument that Makavejev transgressed the decorum of the art film (and thereby lost a certain audience and the sup-

port of humanist critics such as Robin Wood).² But in the late 1970s, Wood’s writing began to highlight aspects of the cinema that attacked or subverted dominant ideologies. Wood himself explains the shift in his chapter on Altman in *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan and Beyond*. In the original essay, written in 1975, he decries the “revolutionary critical fraternity” for taking an interest in Aldrich and Fuller, rather than in “Penn, Schatzberg and Altman, all of whom are hampered, from this viewpoint, by a comparatively civilized sensibility.” In the version updated for the 1986 book, Wood makes his own personal update: “...I regret the disparaging reference to the ‘revolutionary critical fraternity,’ to which I now aspire to belong.”³

From the more radical perspective of Wood’s later criticism, it may be helpful to look at some of his general ideas on cinema, and address them towards *Sweet Movie*. Later in *Hollywood From Vietnam...*, he begins to discuss ‘90s teen movies in relation to the classical period of Hollywood. He extols great periods in artistic achievement as examples of “communality”:

the availability of established genres, the constant interaction and exchange among artists, the sense of *belonging* to the culture, of being supported by it, of speaking to and for a wide audience that cuts across all divisions of class and gender. Compare the isolation of the modern artist, the emphasis on self-expression, ‘originality,’ novelty, the audience dwindled to a small elite.⁴

In this sense, Makavejev finds himself on the fault line. Not being allowed to make a film in Yugoslavia after *WR*, he essentially became an exile. In turn, he sought out community, both in filmmaking and in life, moving first to Paris, and seeking funding from among a variety of countries. Whether consciously or not, in *Sweet Movie* he used the actor Pierre Clémenti, who had already appeared in Bertolucci’s *The Conformist* (1970) and two of Bunuel’s films (a director whom Wood associates Makavejev with more than once). Within the production of the film itself, the commune scene again, though somewhat forced (as described by Makavejev in “*Sweet Movie: The Gentle Side of ‘Destructive Art’*”), provides the most patent example of a direct instance of communality. Makavejev explains how they shot for four days, in a collaborative environment, based largely on improvisation and documentary-style shooting. As he says when describing what could be termed an early reality show, “I just felt that I should not interfere.”⁵ This glimpse into both communal living and communal filmmaking provides a strong contrast to the “isolation of the modern artist” that Wood describes above.

It also gels quite well with another passage in *Hollywood From Vietnam...*, in which Wood discusses a sort of spontaneity-based creativity, again through classic Hollywood. In this case, the films of Howard Hawks “can be read as offering a complete and satisfying (if primitive) philosophy of human existence, developed spontaneously and organically out of a whole complex of interlocking



factors (genre, writers, actors, cinematographers), while Hawks himself appeared to believe that he was just 'having fun'.⁶ From *Sweet Movie*, a scene like the one that begins with a "love cramp" between Miss Monde and El Macho, and has the ambulance taking them from the Eiffel Tower to a restaurant kitchen, we get the feeling that absolutely anything can happen in the film. The sense of spontaneity comes across from both the audience's perspective and the filmmakers'—that neither are quite sure what will happen next. Makavejev lets us know that this is some times true for the filmmakers: "Sometimes we even look for interesting places, and then we figure out what we should do with them. The actor goes into the situation, and we follow him." With an open-minded attitude toward both the smaller picture (the shooting of the scene) and the larger picture (the cutting together of these scenes), Makavejev is able to maintain a fresh experience for participants both in the making of and viewing of the film.

Through "methods" such as communality and spontaneity, one can achieve a radical approach toward filmmaking, but again we must consider the significance of this endeavor in and of itself. Given the context of this essay, we can return to Wood's early writings on Makavejev, when he describes the director's collage method as similar to Bunuel's: "—the effect is not one of simple pointmaking but of complex ironies and an interacting, two-way criticism." This effect reminds me of the situationist practice of *détournement*, which Ken Knabb describes as "the diversion of already existing cultural elements to new subversive purposes."⁷ For the situationists, the practice generally entails a mixture of styles (comic book voice bubbles over classic works of art), mediums (audio and video), and messages (like kung fu or softcore porn reinterpreted to support Marxist theory, in René Viénet's films). But the principle of the practice can be applied to a greater variety of subversive methods.

With regards to the situationist use of *détournement*, Makavejev's *WR* certainly provides the most obvious example. It combines a large scope of existing materials (footage of Stalin, "Sexpol" films) and cultural elements (Reich, the counterculture in the United States) into a new whole that is nothing if not subversive. But *Sweet Movie*, made after Makavejev had been on the lam for a period, may offer a more subtle and "refined" version of the situationist form. We see *détournement* most obviously in the use of the Katyn Forest footage, freely intercut into the dual narrative, with the gruesome close-ups of corpses showing up under Eastern European folk music. We also see it on the wall of Anna Planeta's ship, during her infamous seduction of a group of young boys: a collage using images from Christ to Lenin to Marlon Brando. This scene juxtaposes cultural, political, religious, and sexual icons and concepts. Narrative is also used as a form of *détournement*, especially in the meeting of Anna and the sailor, who introduces himself variously in reference to both the battleship Potemkin (also a reference to the classic Eisenstein film) and to Bakunin. The two of them discuss various revolutions of the past—1905, 1917, the Spanish Civil War—in effect bringing historical revolutionary consciousness into the present, all at once. Even the title of the film is something of a *détournement* when used to describe its content.

The effect of each of these levels of reference and presence is to allow the viewer to move beyond the act of spectatorship. When Wood describes the collage of the early Makavejev films, he sees the result being that the "spectator is forced into an active participation, invited to supply his own synthesis to the

dialectic of thesis and antithesis proposed by the film." Makavejev encourages this sense of active viewing even further in *Sweet Movie*, for instance, by superimposing Sir Owen O'Malley's words to Anthony Eden in February 1944—"Let us think of these things always and speak of them never"—over the Katyn massacre aftermath footage. The viewer immediately catches him or herself in the act of viewing the exhumation of mass graves. A similar response occurs when Miss Monde douses her naked body in a vat of chocolate while acting in a commercial. The commercial director explains, "I want them to feel like they're eating you."

The more direct instances of encouraged active participation in *Sweet Movie* touch on the even more prevalent use of *provocation*. *Sweet Movie* features many acts of provocation upon morality, taste, and bodily functions and reactions. One could spend hours arguing the most potent scene in those senses, whether it be the commune scene, Anna's seduction of the boys, the use of the Katyn massacre footage, or any number of others. But possibly more important is Makavejev's provocation toward the art of film itself. In *Society of the Spectacle*, situationist Guy Debord discusses this notion in respect to *détournement*, equally applicable to Makavejev: "The very style of dialectical theory is a scandal and abomination to the prevailing standards of language and to the sensibilities moulded by those standards, because while it makes concrete use of existing concepts it simultaneously recognizes their fluidity and their inevitable destruction."⁸ This idea gets back to the discussion of the offenses committed by Makavejev against the "decorum of the art film." He showed the fragility of its conventions and the possibilities for—and perhaps the need to—transgress them. And *Sweet Movie* is especially important in this shift to a more radical view of film that Wood made, that traditional cinema must be superseded in order to remain important in the real world.

Here again, we can use Debord: "In the language of contradiction, the critique of culture is a *unified critique*, in that it dominates the whole of culture—its knowledge as well as its poetry—and in that it no longer separates itself from the critique of the social totality. This *unified theoretical critique* is on its way to meet *unified social practice*."⁹ In *Sweet Movie*, Makavejev uses the tools we have already discussed—communality, spontaneity, collage/*détournement*, subversion, provocation—as a means to address "the whole of culture," that being both its "knowledge" (capitalism, socialism, Christianity, etc.) and its "poetry," which in this case is the art of film itself. The key to this critique, which we could perhaps extend to all radical film and film theory in general, is the extent to which it reaches out to the viewer-participant to affect *practice* in real life.

Notes

- 1 Robin Wood, "Dusan Makavejev," *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, Volume Two, edited by Richard Roud (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), 655-657.
- 2 Lorraine Mortimer, "The World Tasted: Dusan Makavejev's *Sweet Movie*," *Senses of Cinema* #47 (May, 2008).
- 3 Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan... And Beyond*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 28, 37.
- 4 Ibid., 310.
- 5 Dusan Makavejev, "Sweet Movie: The Gentle Side of 'Destructive Art'" *Senses of Cinema* #47 (May, 2008).
- 6 Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan... And Beyond*, 334.
- 7 Ken Knabb, introduction to *Complete Cinematic Works*, by Guy Debord (Oakland: AK Press, 2003), viii.
- 8 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, (London: Rebel Press), 112.
- 9 Ibid., 114. Italics in original.

Magic in the Attempt

BEFORE SUNSET AND A LEGACY OF CRITICISM

by ADAM BINGHAM

Of the many attributes that Robin Wood never failed to bring to bear on his life's work as a critic, perhaps the key feature—the one that continued to set him apart—was the personality of his writing, the perennial sense not only that he felt passionately about a film or filmmaker (and indeed about the art of criticism itself; always about criticism itself) but also that there was a deep and sincere connection with that person and his/her work. Could anyone have written so eloquently yet so thoroughly on, say, Michael Haneke's *Le pianiste/The Piano Teacher* (2002) without the forthright biographical engagement that underpinned Wood's essay in the pages of *CineAction*? Or, conversely, would his all but incomparable contribution to discourse on the American horror film have been as penetrating had it lacked the author's knowledge of and passionate feelings about the social/ideological context of corporate capitalist culture? (And one could well say the same not only about Wood's work on the great directors—Ozu, Mizoguchi, Ophuls, Rivette and countless others—but also about genres and otherwise neglected works, such as the *American Pie*-led sub-genre of the gross-out teen comedy that proliferated in Hollywood from the late-1990s). These films, one always senses, were not just meticulously analysed, they were lived and breathed, taken into the heart as much as the mind and cherished for the emotional as much as the intellectual stimulation they facilitated. They were, in short, genuinely loved, and provoked a singular and individual response. Not for nothing was Wood's first collection of essays collectively entitled *Personal Views*.

As with the aforementioned features, so with *Before Sunrise*. Wood's response to the film in the pages of *CineAction* 41 in 1996 (something reprinted in his book *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond*) stressed the fact of its status as a preliminary 'attempt' to explore the film, an initial reaction rather than a thorough reading: 'a series of loosely interconnected and often tentative probes...to define why, for me personally, this film belongs among the dozen or so that exemplify "cinema" at its finest.'¹ It is precisely this aspect of personal response and perspective—with a concomitant allusion to development, to growth as a human being shaping one's reaction to and appreciation of a film as one continues to return to it and assess its significance over time—that stands beside Wood's obvious intelligence and awareness in marking him out as one of the great critics. Part of my rationale for considering *Before Sunset* here is not simply to offer some thoughts on what I am increasingly sure is as great a work as its progenitor—on its beautifully subtle metaphysics and intertextuality—but also to try and work through some of what Robin Wood highlighted with regard to *Before Sunrise*. What follows, then, is my own attempt—to do justice to a great film, a great example of criticism and, hopefully, to a truly great critic.

Like Robin Wood, I knew immediately upon a first viewing of *Before Sunrise* that this was a film for which I felt love, a film that struck a particular chord with me for its openness, intimacy, unforced naturalism and emotional honesty and verisimilitude in what could, in other hands (certainly in other American hands), have become a cliché-ridden high-concept romantic comedy. One can, with a shudder, imagine the film's denouement in such a commercial venture, where instead of Jesse/Ethan Hawke and Céline/Julie Delpy parting with a promise at the train station, they part forever in town, only for the former to have a last minute change of heart in time to make an obligatory last minute dash to reach the latter before her bus spirits her away and out of his life for good. Any such contrivance or convolution is, however, as anathema to this film as it would be consonant in a mainstream rom-com. Instead the narrative is concerned to an extraordinary degree with the complex ways in which men and women relate to one another, how feelings find flight and frustration in language and communication, and the subtle means by which spaces can affect and determine how people behave, even how they feel (and, lest we forget, the spatial environs of Vienna offer myriad opportunities for play and performativity—from the fake phone calls in a cafe to the impromptu dance at the fair). Wood referred to *Before Sunrise* as Mozartian,² by which I would infer that it deals with some of the myriad complexities of love and relationships, especially as this pertains to ideological considerations of how society positions 'the couple' and how individuals can long to move beyond such boundaries even as they may at times revel in reifying or reinscribing them.³

The 'magic in the attempt' singled out by Wood (appropriating a beautiful key line from *Before Sunrise* pertaining to the spaces in and through which God and magic may best be seen to exist in the world: in 'this little space in-between...in the attempt of understanding someone, sharing something') is thus indicative not only of a critical mission statement on his part, nor only of Céline and Jesse's attempts to communicate and 'share' something of themselves with one another; it also refers to Linklater and co-writer Kim Krizan's attempt to thoroughly remap the parameters of the romance film, to see beyond the formulaic and the facile to paint a picture of two souls in flight, of burgeoning love and the emotional and inter-personal processes attendant upon its growth and expression: 'romance for realists,'⁴ as Linklater has aptly described it.

When I first heard about the sequel to *Before Sunrise*, some time in advance of its summer 2004 theatrical release in the United Kingdom (it played in competition in Berlin earlier that year), I felt a heady mixture of boundless joy and delight on the one hand and trepidation on the other. I was delighted to be



Before Sunset

given the chance to see and catch up with two beloved characters again (can we go so far as to call them simply people?), especially as one scene in Linklater's animated 'lucid dream' film *Waking Life* (2001) had appeared to suggest that their relationship had indeed continued, at least somewhere in the mind of the director. However, I was also anxious over seeing a great original besmirched, perhaps even denigrated, through a follow-up that does not do full justice to its vision and generosity of spirit, that has been produced in spite of its makers having nothing new to add and that simply repackages and retreads the hallowed ground of its predecessor. Upon seeing the film I almost immediately found any fears melting away. It became clear that *Before Sunset* was as deeply felt and affecting as *Before Sunrise*, as honest, naturalistic and moving. But perhaps more importantly it was also evident that everyone involved (including actors Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy, who this time are credited as co-writers for the work they undertook in shaping the lives and fates of their respective characters) was thoroughly committed to the project and eager to continue a story that had left a deep impression on them, to the extent that both director and cast professed to a sense of longing over the open ending of the original film, that it had left a hole in their lives that they could no longer ignore. As Linklater has said: 'Having this ending...felt like something was missing in our lives, in a weird way, some place missing inside of us.'⁵

Before Sunset picks up nine years after the original. It unfolds more or less in real time as Jesse (now an author on a book tour, having written a novel about the events of *Before Sunrise*) and Céline, who has come to the former's booksigning in Paris, reacquaint themselves whilst walking around the French capital. In the 60 minutes or so before Jesse needs to leave for the airport, the pair talk over their lives and loves, and gradually seem to penetrate through to the core of what, it transpires, have been variously frustrating, enervating, in many ways unfulfilling intermediate years. Indeed, these years have been marked more than either had hitherto cared (or dared) to admit

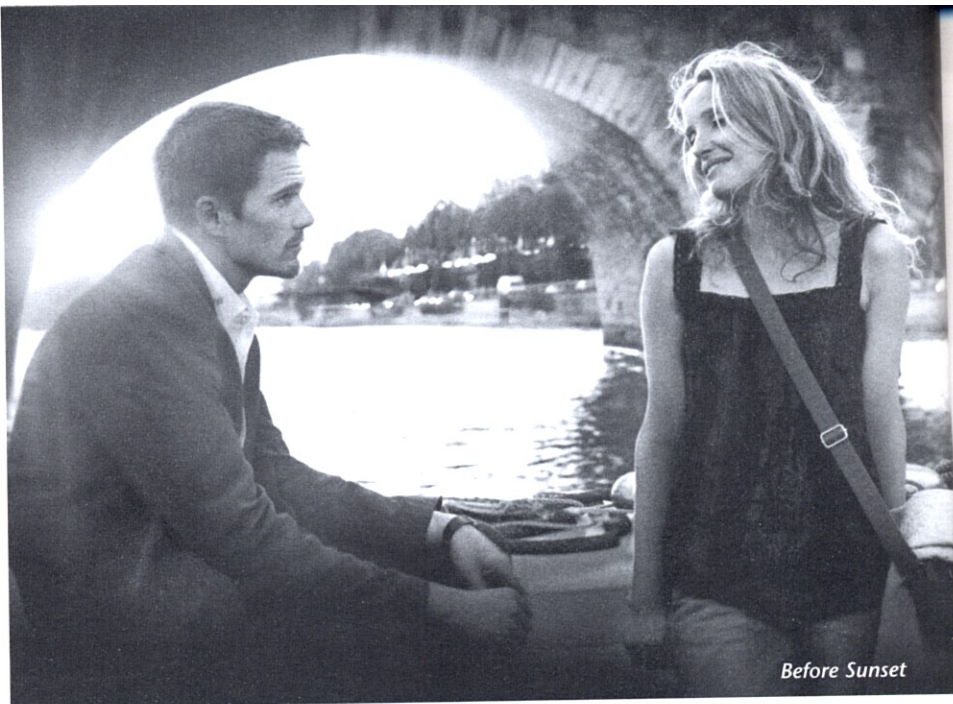
by the fact that they did not meet again in Vienna at Christmas time six months after their original meeting, as they had memorably agreed. The dialogue, gestures and intonations of both characters as they catch up speaks volumes; Jesse's seemingly perennial joking throwing into relief, perhaps matching, Céline's sporadic awkwardness, the anxious darting of her eyes when personal matters enter into their conversation as opposed to the aggressively argumentative and assertive air that comes to the fore when she discusses her job as a relief worker for impoverished third world nations. The pair in fact seem to probe and test one another, at once more open and (at least in places) more guarded than before, the spaces in between appearing more gaping as tentative looks are not quite met and gestures, such as Céline reaching out to Jesse whilst in a car together, awkwardly halted prior to their completion. They measure their lives against the other's, and self-consciously or otherwise (this remains tantalizingly open to question, more so on Jesse's part) seem to look back to Vienna as a turning point in their respective fates. If the events of *Before Sunrise* are an alternative reality to be used in retrospect when Céline's future life becomes staid, this sequel can in turn be read as a similar offering to Jesse. It is into his description of a proposed book about moments within moments during his booksigning that Céline abruptly appears in the diegesis, as if from nowhere. Has she been conjured up by the frustrated author who has tired of his real life? An alternate reality made manifest amidst the landscape of light and love (it is certainly significant that here only Jesse is in a foreign city). He admits that his book was in some ways an attempt to reach out and find Céline, and increasingly it is he who drives the events that develop between them, his touristic experience of his environment mirroring the increasing sense of a spectacle, of a 'story' being told or imagined by an (actual and figurative) author. This balancing act between a literal and figurative storyline is superbly executed in *Before Sunset*, and is worth keeping in mind throughout as a correlative to several other prominent dichotomies.

Rendez-vous in Paris: or, Céline and Jessie Go Boating

The temporal schema of *Before Sunset* is a particularly inspired touch with regard to the specificity of the narrative. However, before the story proper begins there is an inversion of the coda of *Before Sunrise* in that the film opens with a series of shots of Parisian locations that will subsequently be visited by Céline and Jesse (rather than closing with the locations they have already passed through, as did *Before Sunrise*). It is a perfect opening, as it stresses Paris (one might say 'Paris') as a space that prefigures the characters, a pre-existing, pre-packaged site into which they fall and against particularly Jesse's pre-eminent archetypality of romance they are juxtaposed and measured. From here the narrative unfolds entirely in real time, a strategy that lays bare even more markedly than did its progenitor the concern with time that animates both films. It makes every second a past event in an ever-receding, ever-accelerating present tense that their ostensibly dreamy, aimless wandering can be seen as an unconscious attempt to catch and capture, freeze and hold on to as it dances before them like the liquid light on the surface of the Seine. This rather complex, almost Heideggerian, concept of time—of a present becoming the past as it simultaneously races toward a looming future—carries a quite distinct connotation with regard to Céline and Jesse. It remains an unreal, alternative time as opposed to what Jesse in *Before Sunrise* termed 'real-time.' That is, the real-time of everyday life to which the pair inevitably return following their night together in Vienna, the time that was their own once again becoming the official time in which they must part and continue with their separate lives (a temporality that this film, significantly, does not offer).

It is this aspect of the narrative, in addition to the French setting, that has tended to put me in mind of the incomparable Eric Rohmer, whose cinema (a pure cinema of people talking) Linklater's two films have arguably come the closest of any to replicating. One may term Rohmer the master of alternative time for the focus in many of his works on time away from time, usually characters on holiday but also encompassing stolen meetings around Paris (the second story of *Rendez-vous in Paris* [1995]), even lazy afternoons away from the workplace (*Love in the afternoon* [*L'amour après midi*, 1972]). Linklater's films have often had recourse to a similar thematic (something reinforced in his most recent film, *Me and Orson Welles* [2009] in which the Mercury Theatre becomes an insular milieu in which several characters' lives become subject to the whims of a tyrannical demi-god), but *Before Sunrise* and its follow-up make it especially explicit, subject rather than subtext. Indeed, in *Before Sunset* Céline remarks that perhaps she and Jesse are suited only to sporadic meetings in which they walk around European capital cities in summer; that they live their real lives apart and enter an altogether different space when they are together.

This thematic focus is beautifully, unobtrusively, captured in the simple grace of the long steadicam takes and balanced, typically medium close-up single shots that comprise Linklater's découpage. Reviewing the film in 2004, Ryan Gilbey recognized something of the subtle power of this aspect of the film:



'Sensibly Linklater keeps out of his actors' way, and lets them literally do the talking. But the film's plainness should not be undervalued. The long, fluid shots that follow Jesse and Céline through Paris make available the physical space that the characters have passed through: in the back ground, the pavement they have just walked along becomes a marker of the distance travelled, the path chosen. In a film whose characters are pre-occupied with what might have been, without relinquishing their hope for what might yet be, these shots have an unforced metaphorical value.'

There is a succinct underlining here of the metaphysical level ascribed by Robin Wood and others to the first film. The minute-by-minute detail of the sun sinking and the day, perhaps the relationship, drawing steadily to a close (again Rohmer springs to mind as a referent, as he has on several occasions closed stories with a subtly metaphysical dimension coming into play⁷) is underlined late in the narrative when two journeys take over the erstwhile physical movement of the protagonists. Firstly they take a boat trip down the Seine, and immediately afterwards they are driven to Céline's apartment in order, we believe, to say their farewells before Jesse leaves to catch his plane back to America and his family. During these scenes both characters, first Jesse and then Céline, seem to reach a crisis point wherein they each open up to the other about their sense of ennervation and regret. The touristic space they enter on the boat becomes an ironically contrastive site for the tentative early attempts at expressing these feelings. Linklater underlines this by following Céline out onto the outer part of the boat as Jesse (off-camera for the first real time) calls his driver to arrange a pick-up. We see Céline only from behind as she walks into the sun, but we feel the way she seems to drink in the atmosphere of her native city, seeing it in a new way (she says that she forgets how beautiful it can be) as for the first time we too see and regard its splendour, look with rather than at the character.

The aforementioned sense of spectacle inherent in this moment reconfigures the relationship between the characters and the city. And following such a visual signifier of a possible change of narrative register, the sense of the characters being

moved as opposed to themselves moving begins to connote the extent to which notions of fate and destiny can be seen to affect them. Céline and Jesse's lives are here overtly being steered, directed, on a particular course. This has already been made manifest in the fact that Céline did not meet as arranged in Vienna because of the death of her beloved grandmother, something that Jesse implicitly notes has had a major effect on his life for happening precisely when it did. It is also here that the aforementioned play on stories and fiction comes to the fore, and which highlights another prominent point of reference that animates Linklater's cinema: Jacques Rivette's *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (*Céline et Julie vont en bateau*, 1974). This film's performative play with fiction and narrative, what David Thomson describes as its focus on 'two girls...who exist only to the extent that they conspire in each other's effort to make the world fictional,'⁸ rhymes with the notion that Céline and Jesse feed each other's inner lives. But do they fulfill for one another the escape they need from their otherwise disappointing existences, or contribute to the feeling of disappointment in the first place?

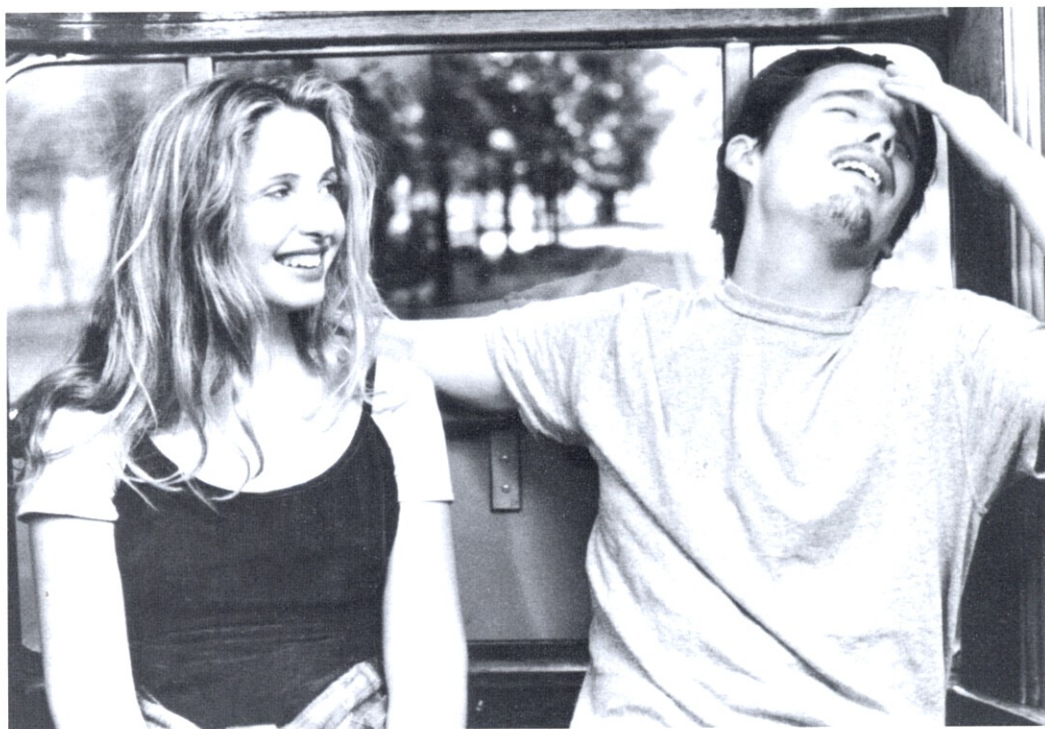
Moreover, the French colloquialism that lends itself to Rivette's film, *aller en bateau*—literally, 'to go boating'—means to be caught up in a story that one is being told, to become lost in a narrative. This, as already noted, may be read in a subjective sense on Jesse's part. However it also carries connotations of control. When Céline and Jesse go boating, and subsequently when they are driven through the streets of Paris, this is inverted as the apparent 'truth' of their respective lives and their unhappiness is offered precisely as a story; that is, for effect. It can be seen as an attempt on their part to gain some control or mastery over themselves by appropriating the function of storyteller and potentially losing themselves in the process. It is a potent image, one that lurks on the periphery of *Before Sunset* and underlines a meta-fictive import to the film that positions Céline and Jesse's lives and loves as fragments of a much larger whole that is thus called into question (the totality of their lives as something more than the sum of its moments). In this profound regard, this subtle exploration of human subjectivity, Linklater's follow-up may even surpass the original, and stand as this great director's finest work⁹.

On a final, personal note, I must add that I believe Robin Wood to be the greatest critic I have ever read, or indeed expect ever to read. He told me once that he adored *Before Sunset*, and I am only sorry that his thoughts never found their way to print, as the work I have tried to produce here in his stead owes much to his observations on *Before Sunrise*. However, I would ideally like this feature to stand as testament to the man as much as the critic. I feel privileged to be able to say that he was every bit as warm and generous a person as he was insightful and stimulating a critic, and few experiences in my life have come close to the surprise and

euphoria I felt when, as an undergraduate film studies student in 2003, I received a very positive, complimentary email from him in response to an article I had submitted for consideration for *CineAction*. The friendship we subsequently struck up meant more to me than I fear I ever fully communicated to him, and his ongoing support of and advice regarding my work was something I cherished dearly and felt both great pride and humility in receiving. I hope this feature may in part offer a belated thank you for this help and friendship, and stand as a modest token of my unending admiration and gratitude for his character and professional achievements. For Robin.

Notes

- 1 Robin Wood, *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond*, (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1998), 318.
- 2 This pronouncement was made not in the feature on *Before Sunrise* but in referring back to the film as part of a festival review of Linklater's *School of Rock* in *CineAction* Issue 63 in 2004.
- 3 One may also note here that in the above-noted essay Wood draws attention to a commonality between Linklater and Renoir (something supported by the former's admitted admiration for the latter). And, of course, there is an essay in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film* comparing *The Rules of the Game* (*Le Règle du Jeu*, 1939) to Mozart, particularly *Così fan tutti*.
- 4 Richard Linklater, quoted in Nick James, "Debrief Encounter," *Sight & Sound*, August, 2004, 12.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ryan Gilbey "Before Sunset," *Sight & Sound*, August, 2004, 44.
- 7 I am thinking particularly of the ending of *The Green Ray* (*Le rayon vert*, 1986), when the protagonist stands enraptured before the titular phenomenon, a momentary tinge across the horizon as the sun sets. One may also point to the first story of the portmanteau film *4 Adventures of Reinette and Mirabelle* (*4 aventures de Reinette et Mirabelle*, 1987), in which the protagonists get up in the dead of night to witness 'the blue hour', the special brief time between night and dawn when silence reigns and the world appears perfectly blue. In both cases, the privileged perception of these events seems to crystallize the burgeoning relationship between two characters, to connect and bind them together.
- 8 David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film: Fourth Edition* (Great Britain: Little, Brown, 2002), 744.
- 9 And most influential, as several recent films have in various ways attempted to map out similar terrain: Abbas Kiarostami's *Certified Copy* (2010), the Spanish director José Luis Guerín's *In the City of Sylvia* (*Dans la ville de Sylvia*, 2007) and Michel Gondry's endearing *The Science of Sleep* (2006).



Before Sunrise

Love Me Three Times

TIME AND NARRATIVE IN *LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN*

By MICHAEL LONGFIELD

"Vienna about 1900." A dark and rainy night. A horse-drawn carriage stops on a wet cobblestone street, and out steps a dashing fellow in top hat and coat. He shrugs off the concern of the two men inside, who tell him they'll be back in three hours at 5 am to pick him up. The man smiles: "I don't mind so much being killed... but you know how hard it is for me to get up in the morning. Goodnight." He walks away.

A typical Hollywood film might take ten to fifteen minutes to establish the characters and setting. Max Ophüls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948) is particularly accelerated. Cut to a two-shot of the men inside the carriage. They speak the fellow's given name: "Stefan". They ponder whether Stefan really intends to fight a duel that means certain death. Cut to the outside of the apartment building as Stefan goes in. Offscreen the concierge asks who is at the door. Stefan answers with his surname: "Brandt". Stefan Brandt is met at the door by his manservant, John. Stefan tells John to have a cab ready for his escape in an hour. He has no intention of fighting the duel (clearly the reason for his earlier wit). "Honor is a luxury only

gentlemen can afford," he says. (Stefan is thus at best a coward and at worst a scoundrel, the viewer concludes.) A letter arrived in the night. He is struck by its first words: "By the time you read this letter, I may be dead..." He sits to read. He learns that the author once lived across the hall from him. That later she became his lover, and that she has been in love with Stefan her entire adult life. And Stefan has no idea who is she. The film dissolves to her story. Lisa Berndle's letter appears entirely unrelated to Stefan's predicament, but by the end of the film Lisa's story justifies Stefan's about-face and he goes to the duel.

Following V.F. Perkins, critics have noted three distinct timelines in *Letter*. Alan Williams categorises those timelines as:

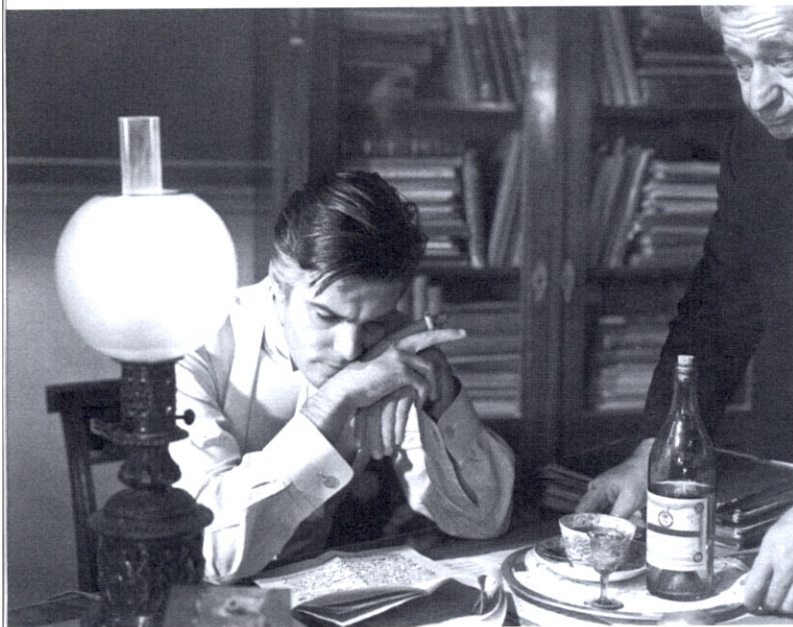
- 1) the 10-12 year span of Lisa's story
- 2) the three hours of Lisa's narration
- 3) the film's 85 minutes running time (47).

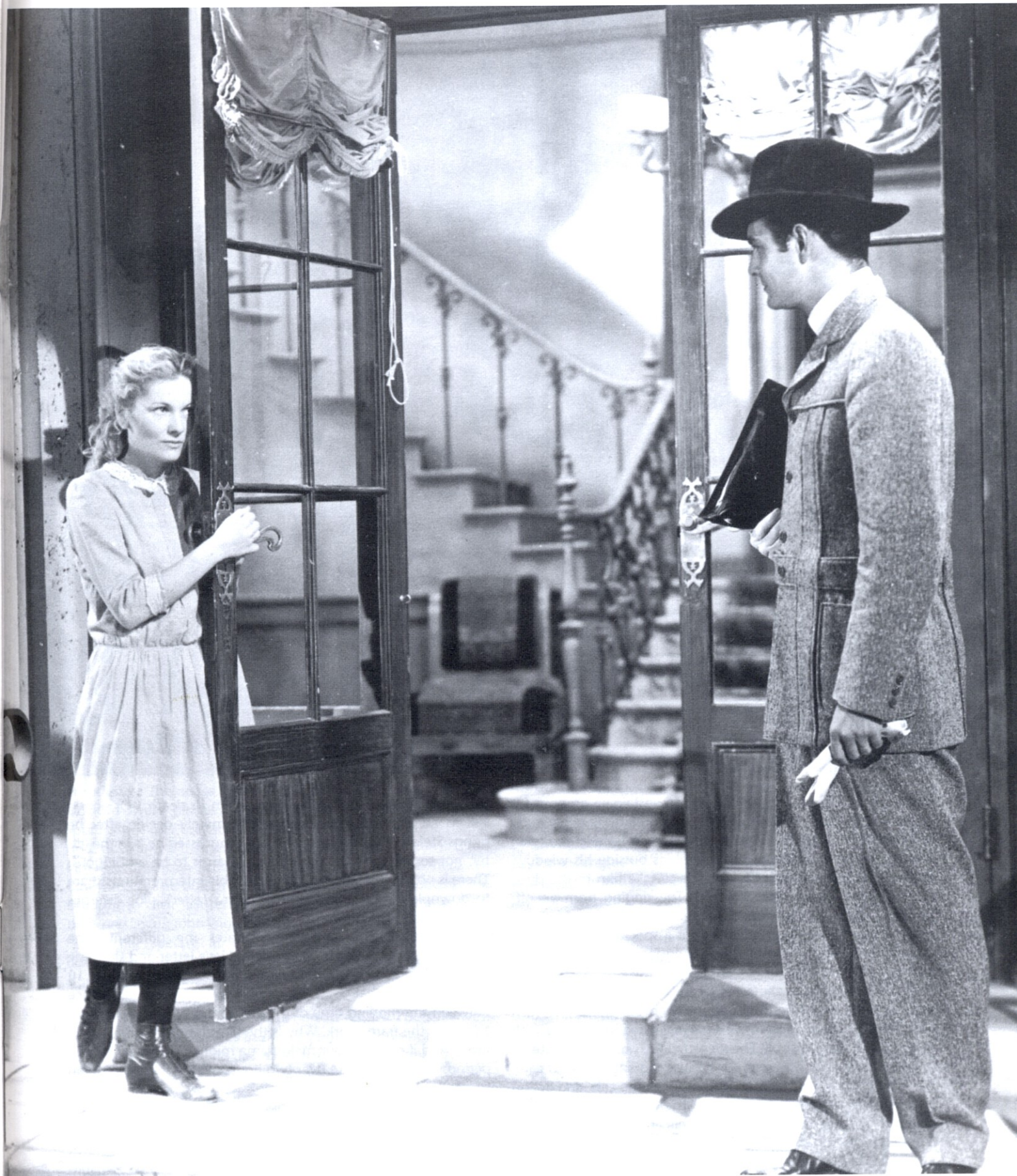
The three hours of Lisa's narration is also the time between when Stefan comes home at 2 am and when the carriages arrive to take him to the duel at 5 am. Extrapolating from Perkins and Williams, *Letter's* three timelines reflect three distinct narratives:

- 1) Lisa's love of Stefan (A story)
- 2) Stefan and the duel (B story)
- 3) the narrative of the film (plot)

It should be clear that Stefan's point of view is not the same as Lisa's, or there would be no need for her letter and everything between them would have ended happily ever after in "Vienna about 1890". But Stefan's point of view is not Ophüls', nor is it the spectator's. The framing device of the "B Story" is not the "plot". Unlike Stefan, the viewer knows that Lisa Berndle is the unknown woman, knows that she is the same person whom Stefan continually forgets. Conversely, Stefan knows more than the viewer. Lisa, writing to Stefan of her marriage, says, "You know who my husband is". But the viewer does not yet know at this point in the plot, and likely has not yet figured out Johann Stauffer's role in the tale. The plot is not merely the intermingling of Lisa and Stefan's points of view.

Consider how time reflects the differing points of view. When Stefan comes home, he asks John for a coffee and





Letter from an Unknown Woman



Letter from an Unknown Woman

cognac, and tells him to have a cab downstairs in an hour for his escape. John gives him the letter, and Stefan sits in his study and begins to read. About an hour of screen time later, Stefan finishes the letter and a carriage rumbles outside his window. But it is not the cab. It is his seconds to take him to the duel. Three hours of story have elapsed. The ringing from an off-screen clock tower confirms it is indeed the appointed hour of 5 am. It is remarkably disorienting for a spectator. It might be the cinematic equivalent of lying down for a little catnap and awaking after a long slumber.

What happened to the escape cab? Did it ever arrive? John does reappear with the drinks about twenty minutes of screen time after Stefan requested it. He is never seen returning with news of the cab's arrival. The viewer does not know if Stefan merely dismissed it offscreen, or he was too engrossed to care. It is equally possible that John does not call the cab, and acting as Stefan's "guardian angel" senses the effect Lisa's letter will have on him and deliberately keeps him reading so he will be compelled to go to the duel. (That John could "know" the effect of Lisa's letter is no more prescient than Lisa's "knowing"

that her letter will ultimately unite them in death.) Or acting less as an agent of fate, John might merely decide after he brings Stefan the cognac, seeing how engrossed he is in the letter, not to call the cab. *Letter* must mean it to be ambiguous. There is no definite answer. Yet all possible interpretations share to downplay Stefan's own choice. Here *Letter's* plot diverges from Stefan's story.

Practicality (and sanity) necessitates the different time frames between the years covered by Lisa's letter and the time it takes Stefan to read it. (No filmmaker has yet to tackle a 10 year movie.) What is striking, however, is the difference between the running time of the film and the three hours that comprise the framework. Why is the film not more or less real-time? And if a three hour melodrama might be unlikely for the period, why does it take over two hours of story time for Stefan to read the letter? Stefan Zweig's original novella is easily poured over in an hour, and includes every word of its heroine's twelve page letter. So transfixed by its tale he barely acknowledges John bringing in the coffee and cognac requested earlier. It seems unlikely that he has spent the time rereading the let-

ter given his reaction when he reaches its postscript from the nuns near the end of the film that Lisa died. Indeed assuming the film's letter is about the same length, the time it would take Stefan to carefully read Lisa's every word would be perfect to then escape in that cab he never takes, the viewer never sees, and the film never again mentions.

In a sense, these questions might not matter. Narrative compression is a hallmark of almost all storytelling, not just Hollywood classical cinema. Yet Stefan's story unfolds over such a specific period of time—to continually insist and reinforce that it is precisely three hours, that the cab is arriving in one hour, but that after an hour of screen time it's his seconds who have arrived—further reinforces that Stefan and the viewer do not, cannot, share the same points of view. Stefan's experience of reading the letter is not the same as the viewer's watching the film.

Ophuls and screenwriter Howard Koch made many changes in adapting Zweig's novella, most notably expanding the framework with the addition of the duel. Zweig's plot is poetic and simple: "The celebrated novelist R." returns home from a refreshing trip on his 41st birthday to find among his papers "two dozen hastily written pages in an unfamiliar, shaky, feminine hand, a manuscript rather than a letter" (157). After a two paragraph introduction, the letter begins and its unnamed author's voice dominates the novella uninterrupted until her last words, "Thank you... I love you, I love you. Farewell" (185). R. is trembling as he puts down the letter. No image of the author forms, only vague recollections. He then gazes at an empty vase on his writing-table (the woman had been sending him flowers anonymously every year on his birthday) and finally feels tangible proof of her absence. Zweig writes,

He became conscious of a death and conscious of undying love. Something struck a chord in his innermost soul, and he strove ardently to reach out in spirit towards the unseen presence, as though he were hearing distant music (185).

In the first two paragraphs, R. is not the same broken soul that one senses in Stefan at the start of the film. And the impact of her letter is much more ambiguous in the novella. Zweig emphasizes the sense of loss—her death emphasized by the lack of flowers, reduced to an ephemeral, nameless, imageless spirit. She exists only in words to the novelist—but the reader does not know if the news spurs R. to action (or inaction). In the film, the "musician's chord is not struck", nor does he "hear distant music". The boutonniere Stefan takes from the bouquet she brought to their last rendezvous instead embodies her continued presence. John signs her letter: "Lisa Berndle". Stefan "sees" her spectre at the door. Stefan goes to the duel, acknowledging himself as Lisa's lover. The letter of the novella signifies an emptiness and the loss of her love. In the film, it is a testament and confirmation of her love.

The novella uses a much more narrow range of perspectives. There are only two voices in Zweig's book, the omniscient narrator and the woman's letter, and once the woman's letter begins on paragraph three, Zweig never breaks from her voice until the letter's completion two paragraphs from the end of the novella. R. as an autonomous character recounted by the omniscient narrator barely comprises four paragraphs of Zweig's 18 page novella. Otherwise he is only a character inasmuch as he is recounted by events narrated in the letter, and

the only access the reader has to their eluded romance is mediated directly through her voice. Might R. have recalled things differently—if he could have remembered? How might an objective narrator complement or counterpoint her voice?

Perkins maintains that the film's ambiguities are encapsulated by its "multi-layered time structure" (Williams 47). "For Perkins," Williams writes, "Lisa's vision is endorsed on one level of the film and subtly undermined on another" (49). While Lisa narrates the flashbacks in Ophuls' film, the flashbacks are not restricted to her point of view. Her voice never dominates like the anonymous author's does in the novella. This is clear throughout Lisa and Stefan's first date together—the musicians thoroughly unmoved by Stefan and Lisa's rapture on the dance floor, for example. Lisa is certainly not privy to the complaints of the bratwurst chomping Brunhilds while Lisa and Stefan waltze during their first evening together, yet the musicians are prominent in every shot that the music plays. For the spectator, their banter provides an amusing counterpoint to Lisa's reverie by defusing a potentially saccharine moment (or worse, a scene that could have been cynical and cruel given the eventual turn of events) and ultimately making the scene more humane and touching. Williams continues,

Perkins terms this dual-level structure in the film "Ophuls' refusal to make up his mind" about Lisa. Yet matters are in fact much more complicated: these "two Lisas"—one endorsed by the film's frame of reference, the other not—are presented not as alternatives but appear simultaneously (49).

Robin Wood eloquently summarizes Perkins' insight (and Ophuls' achievement) as "the balancing of two apparently incompatible modes, romanticism and irony, without ever permitting one to overwhelm or disqualify the other, without ever lapsing into sentimentality or cynicism" (207). In terms of how this complicates the viewers' relationship to Lisa, Pauline Kael is apt. She writes, "Joan Fontaine suffers and suffers, but so exquisitely [...] that one doesn't know whether to clobber the poor, wronged creature or give in and weep" (419). The film's time structures (10 years, three hours, 85 minutes) reflect three distinct points of view.

Ophuls repeatedly shows Lisa completely oblivious to her surroundings, especially the people who become integral to the construction of her romance: she gets in the way of the movers bringing Stefan's belongings into her apartment building (and by extension, Stefan into her life); it is Stefan, not Lisa, who pays the "engineer" during their locomotion voyages on that fateful night (and not even Stefan seems to take much notice of the bundled old bloke sipping hot coffee and pushing a giant crank to keep the illusion rolling); and Lisa is curiously curt with John when she returns to Stefan's apartment for their rendezvous ten years after their first.

The flashbacks are motivated by Lisa's letter, but do not conform to it. Yet at other moments they seem eerily complicit. Upon returning to Vienna, Lisa takes a job as a model at a ready-to-wear shop. The film makes clear it is the sort of work where the women are as much on display as the clothes. An older officer sits in the salon as Lisa models a dress for his female companion. The officer gets up and the camera tracks with him over to Lisa's employer, Madame Spitzer, in the foreground. Lisa continues curtsying in the background of the shot as Madame Spitzer breaks the news to the officer that "she is not like *that*." The film dissolves to the exterior of the shop. The

other models are greeted and whisked off by male companions, leaving Lisa alone in the snow. Her voice-over resumes: "Madame Spitzer spoke the truth. I was not like the others. Nobody waited for me." But how does Lisa *know* what Madame Spitzer says to him when they were clearly out of earshot?

The viewer actually knows surprisingly little what Lisa wrote in the letter. The assumption is—and given Lisa's voice-overs it is probably not false—that it matches fairly closely what the viewer sees and hears onscreen. But it has already been shown that it does not and cannot match exactly. Wood addresses this issue of visual and verbal narration in *Letter*. A writer can say "chair", but a filmmaker must necessarily choose a specific chair—this chair and not that chair or that other chair—decide what angle to shoot it from, how to light it, and how long to hold the shot. The decisions accumulate twenty-four times a second. Wood writes, "Ophuls—far more subtly—never contradicts Lisa. Her narration is allowed its own integrity, which he respects, even venerates; it is, as far as it goes, 'the truth'. But it is her truth, not his" (*Sexual* 206).

It is possible that while Ophuls shows the elderly officer talking to Madame Spitzer, Lisa writes something simpler along the lines of: "I worked at a ready-to-wear shop, and the proprietress Madame Spitzer was always warning our admirers that I was unlike the other girls. Madame Spitzer was telling the truth...." (The novella offers no clue here. The heroine of the novella also works at a ready-to-wear shop upon her return to Vienna, but never specifies exactly what she does there.) Lisa the narrator shows a flair for the poetic turn of phrase, but her voice as a narrative writer is unknown to the viewer. Given the discrepancies suggested between what Ophuls shows and Lisa's narration, one cannot assume that Stefan is seeing the same story as the viewer. In fact, the opposite seems more likely, and what Stefan reads is a text much closer in point of view—if not in tone—to the letter from Zweig's book.

The development of the framework and the dilution of the woman's narration would seem to privilege Stefan's role. Yet possibly only someone who just read a plot summary of *Letter* and not watched the film could fall danger to the kind of interpretation that Tania Modleski cautions. She writes,

We might suspect, then, that the film's movement will involve Stefan's coming to repudiate the former childishness of his ways and to acknowledge the sway of patriarchal law. And indeed the final sequence of the film shows Stefan bravely setting off to keep his word and get himself killed. Thus, though the body of the film concerns the story of Lisa, the woman referred to in the title, it would appear that her story is really a story of and for the man, and, looked at this way, the film seems to provide exceptionally strong support for those critics who contend that there is no such thing as a woman's film, that Hollywood films are always dramas of and for the male ("Time" 250).

Modleski shrewdly complicates this thesis, arguing the need to go beyond the psychoanalytic castration anxiety (and by implication psychoanalytic film theory) that denies the validity or significance of the woman's picture for its female audience (261–2), but her warning is ill-founded. No sensitive critic (including herself) could suggest the film is Stefan's. Despite the framework the viewer is no closer to Stefan's point of view than

to Lisa's. And if Ophuls complicates the viewer's relationship to Lisa, she's never "unknown" to the viewer no matter how many times Stefan forgets her. Robin Wood rejects Modleski's Oedipal warnings and argues that "despite the fact that Stefan dominates the framework, this is Lisa's film" (*Sexual* 224). It is Lisa's obsession that moves the film forward. Wood suggests Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) for comparison. If Lisa's obsession for a man defines her as a character—if not a woman—it is certainly no more defining than Scottie's obsession for Madeleine in *Vertigo*. (No one would possibly state that *Vertigo* is proof that the male film does not exist, although it does severely problematize the "male film".) One might even argue that Lisa's obsession is ultimately healthier and less solipsistic than Scottie's since the fault in recognition in *Letter* lies with the object and not the subject. (Williams' evocation of A.J. Greimas' basic elements of any story—"actants," or in the anthropomorphized form that most stories take, 'characters'; and objects of value"—might apply to Lisa and Stefan the way Williams notes it applies to Madame de... and her earrings (106–7).) Lisa is bewitched by Stefan before she even sees him—falling in love with his "beautiful things" and the sound of his piano—but he is at least a living man who (sometimes) returns her affections. Scottie is in love not with a woman, but the performance of a woman (and later that performance's image), and ends up desecrating the vision's flesh and blood embodiment in an attempt to recreate a phantom.

Unlike *Vertigo*, there are very few point of view shots in *Letter*, and each one tends to be all the more remarkable because of it. As Wood notes the most striking POV in *Letter* is the shot of Lisa at the top of the staircase as she watches Stefan come home with his latest conquest, a shot that is later replicated when Stefan brings Lisa home on their first night together. The second time it is the viewer alone who is watching. Ophuls' reclamation of an emblematic shot of Lisa's romantic disappointment at first feels triumphant—now it is Lisa, and not some other woman, coming home with Stefan just as she always fantasized. It is a projection of her wish fulfillment. But it is triumph tinged with irony. The shot also foreshadows that regardless of Stefan's intentions Lisa is just another conquest. It further reinforces Lisa's point of view is not the viewer's—but suggests how the two lovers will ultimately become united.

In the scene earlier that evening when Stefan passes Lisa on the street, their exchange of glances echoes their first face-to-face meeting at the doorway of the apartment: Stefan passes Lisa, walks a few paces. He stops and turns. Cut to close-up of Stefan. Cut to a long shot of Lisa standing shyly by the door. This night, however, Stefan will approach Lisa. The repeated pattern teases that Stefan will recognize Lisa as the girl next door. The camera tracks behind Stefan over his shoulder as he walks toward her. The sequence appears to be constructed around Stefan's gaze: a close-up of Stefan followed by a shot of what he is looking at, Lisa standing in full view, cut back to Stefan, and then track over his shoulder as he walks towards Lisa, vibrating with anticipation. Identification is created not through what the viewer sees, but what the viewer knows. It's not the gaze, but knowledge that aligns the viewer's sympathies and emotions. The viewer, not Stefan (or Scottie in *Vertigo*), knows these are the same women. And thus the viewer does not see what Stefan sees despite the shared POV. The viewer does not merely see a pretty woman standing in the snow, but the barely contained euphoria of Lisa Berndle being approached by her true love. It is how one might imagine



desire—and being desired.

Lisa's letter offers Stefan another chance. Perkins earlier faults Lisa repeatedly for never letting Stefan reciprocate. He wryly notes that Lisa's "major tactic in interaction with Stefan seems to be helpful passivity" (Williams 49). Lisa—so enwrapped in her romantic daydream, so desperate to improve herself for Stefan (not that he ever asks her to), so willing to prove that "she is not like the others" (the girls at the shop who regularly go home with the customers)—cannot take the first step towards real communication. She is willing to remake herself for Stefan, but she wants him on her terms. In their two subsequent meetings, Stefan repeatedly tells Lisa in one way or another: a) I feel you could help me, and b) I feel I've seen you before. Just once Lisa could tell him, "Yes, I *can* help you. You *have* seen me before."

When *Vertigo's* "unknown woman" sits to write her letter, unlike Lisa she never sends her confession. Judy's voice only exists between herself and the spectator. Scottie and Judy's points of view are never reconciled—just as Scottie remains oblivious (or at best indifferent) to Midge's affections. (The brief shots of Midge's reactions to Scottie's growing romance with Madeleine are indeed the few breaks in the film's otherwise complete commitment to Scottie's point of view in the first half.) *Vertigo's* brilliance is exactly how committed it is to a kind of first person cinema, and then midway overlaps that POV with another. The viewer is locked first with Scottie then abruptly

switches to Judy, but the two lines only come together in death and never achieve romantic harmony. *Vertigo* is a kind of tale of two soliloquies (or three soliloquies if one takes into account Midge). No less brilliant, *Letter* uses its three narrative spaces and three timelines, however, to bring its lovers together. The dissolve that links Stefan and Lisa in death also echoes their first meeting. As Lisa opens the door for Stefan and steps back behind it, Stefan's face is briefly reflected in the glass superimposed on top of Lisa's. Now back in the "present" of Stefan's apartment, Lisa's bouquet of flowers of their last meeting sits in the vase just starting to wilt and droop. And the shot of the doorway meeting that once exemplified Lisa's unrequited yearnings—Lisa away from the camera in a long shot, and Stefan at best bemused by what the spectator clearly sees as her enrapture—now transformed into Stefan's acknowledgement of her love seems a testament to the film's power, the power of the film in general, and the power of love over all.

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The Formal Dualism of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*

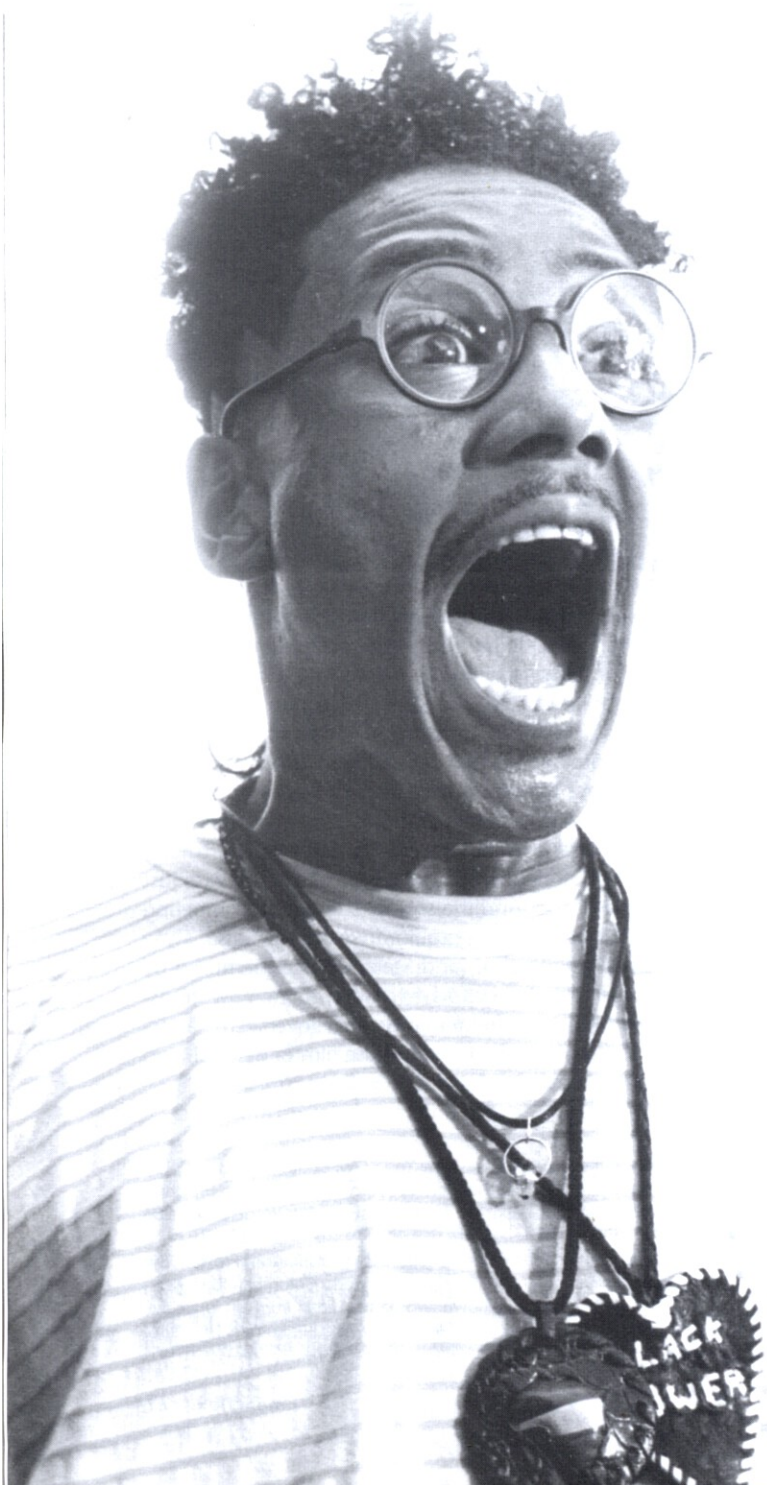
By Robert K. Lightning

In an essay on Kurosawa's *High and Low*, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto¹ examines the film's "formal dualism". This dualism takes the form primarily of oppositions, the film's titles in both English and Japanese (*Heaven and Hell*) alerting us to this formal strategy. Yoshimoto notes that a "moral Manichaeism" is characteristic of melodrama and one can find it as a structural and thematic feature in many genres. (The *policier*, the gothic, and the western are exemplary).

The privileged realization of duality as a motif is the use of *doubles*, again exemplified in the genres noted in the opposition of hero and villain in both the *policier* and the western and between hero and monster in the gothic. However in the complexities of the relationship between the doubles in melodrama (and to qualify Mr. Yoshimoto's reading) we actually find something closer to that of Hegelian dialectics rather than that progress characteristic of Manichaeism. (Although Manichaeism is hardly the only religion whose mythology describes a purifying movement toward a final triumphant separation of good and evil). That is, the movement of the narrative is less toward *separation* of the opposing forces characteristic of religious myth than toward something akin to *synthesis*: What gives the relationship of the doubles in progressive texts its profundity is the impossibility at the conclusion of making a moral distinction between the opposing forces. As Yoshimoto insightfully notes of the relationship of doubles in Kurosawa "the boundary between the two is constantly tested, questioned, and problematized."

Spike Lee frequently utilizes doubles in his work, the power struggle between rivals in *School Daze* and *Mo' Better Blues* or the contrast between siblings in *Jungle Fever* and the *policier* *Clockers* being exemplary. By far *Do the Right Thing* (*DTRT*) illustrates the most extensive use of doubles as a structuring device in Lee. While recognizing that the recognition (or denial) of commonality between doubles is the *raison d'être* of the motif I would like to distinguish between two types of doubles used in the film:

- 1) One type corresponds with the use of the double in *High and Low* and, as noted, is based upon dialectical oppositions between the double figures, often narrativized as antagonism between 'hero' and 'villain'. In Lee's film this type is closely associated with the characters of Sal (Danny Aiello) and Mookie (Spike Lee). Sal is a storeowner and Mookie his employee. However (it is a mark of the film's greatness) from this relational germ, countless related political oppositions can be theorized: racial (whites vs. blacks); Marxist (ownership/private property/production vs. non-ownership/public space/consumption); psychoanalytic (power vs. impotence); imperialist (colonizer vs. colonized).
- 2) The other type of double is not defined by difference but obvious *similarity*. This type of double is extensively used throughout the narrative. The relationship between Mother-Sister (Ruby Dee) and Jade (Joie Lee) is exemplary, the connection between the two all the more obvious for the fact that they are the film's most



prominent black women. Both women let living quarters, Jade to her brother Mookie and Mother-Sister (who owns a brownstone) to her tenants. Both women also have contentious relationships with a man.

Mookie and Da Mayor (Ossie Davis) respectively. Significantly, Mother-Sister tells Jade that Da Mayor, one of several doubles for Mookie in the film, reminds her of her least favorite people, her ex-husband and her tenants. This provides an additional parallel between the two characters for not only is Mookie Jade's 'tenant', Lee characterizes their relationship throughout (primarily through Mookie's sexual possessiveness) as that of *lovers* rather than siblings. The very name "Mother-Sister" makes the point of the character's symbolic relationship to Jade deriving as it does from both her status as neighborhood matriarch as well as her sharing significant traits with Mookie's sister.

The film's formal dualism is further developed through the critical relationship Lee establishes *between* the two types of doubles: The central conflict between Mookie and Sal finds *symbolic* expression in relation to their symbiotic doubles. The film's subsidiary characters, although fully realized within the narrative, also function symbolically in relation to the central conflict as alter egos, projections of personality traits or potentialities within both Sal and Mookie.

These alter egos divide very simply by race. The scene where a white motorist (Frank Vincent) tries to traverse a street where youths of color have opened a fire hydrant exemplifies this formal strategy, the whites present sharing common traits with Sal. The driver, whose car is ruined, drives a vintage car, as does Sal. Clearly a vaunted object (to prevent damage to the car he elicits a promise from the youths to stop the flow of water until he passes), his obsession with his car suggests something of Sal's obsession with his pizzeria. A parallel relationship between the two men is even more strongly suggested as each man hubristically puts his treasured possession at risk, the driver by not backing up and taking an alternate route and Sal by stubbornly refusing to relocate, a decision repeatedly questioned throughout the film. The flooding of the car anticipates the destruction of the pizzeria.

The white policeman who turns off the hydrant (Rick Aiello) is also Sal's double, his function as double underlined by the fact that he is portrayed by Danny Aiello's real-life son. In his hubris he is a brutal exaggeration of Sal, specifically in his confidence that he is in control of the populace with which he interacts. For example, his suppression of the energy represented by the community's spontaneous play *outdoors* parallels Sal's suppression of energies *indoors*, within the pizzeria ("No music, no rap, no music!"). Compare additionally how Sal threatens to "kick ass" when Pino (John Turturro) and Mookie argue, as if their aggression were a threat to his personal authority. Similarly, the policeman warns the members of the community that they will "have to answer to *me*" if the hydrant is again switched on. As an expression of Sal's personality, the cop represents that aspect that relies upon brute strength and physical power (note Sal's reliance upon his baseball bat to establish control). Their relationship as doubles is confirmed at the conclusion when the cop kills Radio Raheem after Raheem overpowers Sal.

Throughout the narrative Sal's sons, Vito (Richard Edson) and Pino, also function as alter egos, Vito representing his liberal, tolerant side, the vociferous Pino, his dictatorial and potentially racist side. Significantly during the course of the film we see Pino hovering behind his father, encouraging and influencing him, recalling another cultural embodiment of the double, the mythical *doppelgänger*.

The black characters associated with Mookie also share personality traits with him but the emphasis is more on the *potentialities* they represent. Lee emphasizes this reading of Mookie by his use of a *journey* motif: Although he never journeys beyond the perimeters of his neighborhood, like a character in a fairy tale or myth, he encounters various symbolic characters along his route, each representing a possible *political* choice. Three characters stand out in particular, each offering Mookie advice during the day. (I will return to a fourth character later). Mother-Sister (who, because of the heat,



advises Mookie not to work too hard) is a double not only for Mookie's sister but Mookie himself. Observing the world from the same settled position daily, she represents Mookie's desire to remain politically neutral, to allow things to happen. (In the Sal/Buggin' Out encounter, Mookie remains an observer until the point where he is *forced* to become involved). Mother-Sister also represents the possibility of a permanent withdrawal from life's conflicts: As she herself notes "Mother-Sister always *watch-es*".

In his fecklessness (he is inebriated much of the time) and compliance with the white status quo, Da Mayor (who advises Mookie enigmatically to "do the right thing") is clearly meant to recall traditional cultural images of black men, a point emphasized by his encounters with Mother-Sister, which suggest the comic stereotype (from Whale's *Showboat* to *Sanford and Son*) of combative black male/female relationships. His willingness to take on menial labor for meager compensation (when Pino orders Mookie to sweep the pizzeria, it is Da Mayor who eventually takes on the task) grotesquely projects Mookie's delivery-boy job into a bleak future. When neighborhood teens accuse him of being a corruptive influence within the neighborhood, in defending himself Da Mayor refers to a family he possibly abandoned in the past. This provides an additional parallel to Mookie, who similarly neglects his girlfriend Tina and their son Hector.

Finally, Buggin' Out (who advises Mookie to "stay black") is a comic exaggeration of Mookie's spirit of political protest. (Mookie not only challenges Pino on his racism, but he twice defends Da Mayor from oppressors). Buggin' Out represents a final, angry withdrawal into a confrontational stance. It is also he, however, who realizes the necessity to take political action (or "fight the power"), a position that Mookie and the community align themselves to only after Raheem's death.

(One might remark, in passing, that such doubling might provide an explanation for the odd little street scene when the child, Eddy, is scolded by his mother. Although clearly reflecting Lee's notorious bias toward women, the scene is somewhat redeemed by relating the woman to the film's *other* belligerent young mother, Tina/Rosie Perez, who along with Mookie's son Hector, is seen here for the first and last time *outside* of her apartment. As the woman explicitly denies the child's father interference in her child rearing, she possibly represents for Lee a dark potentiality in Tina and thus Mookie's potential exclusion from Hector's life. The castrating mother is a familiar feature in Lee).

The division of alter egos by race is not entirely strict. Lee achieves decided ironic effects by exposing similarities between characters that cut *across* racial lines. For instance, those between Mookie and his rival, Pino, are very striking. As employees of Sal's Famous both are frustrated and repressed, their complaints always conveniently redirected by Sal into work. (This helps to underline the impression given of Mookie as a potential third son within the family business). Even more striking is each man's attachment to his younger sibling, both Mookie's feelings for Jade and Pino's for Vito suggesting incestuous desire. Lee also exposes similarities between Sal and both Buggin' Out and Radio Raheem. Sal's comment to Mookie about freedom ("What freedom? This is *my* pizzeria!") is very closely echoed by Buggin' Out (whom Sal has just expelled from the pizzeria) as each lays claim to the pizzeria, Sal as private property and Buggin' Out as public space. (An opposition discussed in W.J.T. Mitchell's fine essay "The Violence of Public

Art").² Similarly, in the Sal/Radio Raheem confrontation over the pizza counter, each man encounters his distorted mirror image as each impassively asserts his power.

As noted, *DTRT*'s basic narrative opposition between employer and employee can be approached from a variety of social and political theoretical positions but the *psychoanalytic* seems to me the most resonant. This is because *all* social dynamics, whether those of class, race, patriarchal gender, etc. have a personal psychological component or purchase. It is for this reason that I will continue to discuss the film in terms of an opposition between *power* and *impotence*: The politics of *castration* are probably the most resonant within the film.

This theme is established in the music of the opening credits, Public Enemy's *Fight the Power* (to which the film's most vocal yet socially and economically impotent character dances, single mother Tina), music also heard throughout on Radio Raheem's stereo. It is there in the film's climactic moments when the community confronts a convenient symbol of white racial and capitalist power, Sal's pizzeria. It is the underlying premise behind Mookie's insistence on "getting paid" (as he tells Jade), his only compensation for a job that is physically wearing, as well as occasionally demeaning and humiliating. But if the politics of castration color all patriarchal social relations, its relevance to relations based upon *exchange* and consumption are of particular interest to Lee, his situating much of the action in a place of business (where the dynamics of exchange are constantly present) making this clear.

W.J.T. Mitchell notes the importance of economic participation or ownership as prerequisite to full social participation under capitalism. One can hardly ignore the reification of objects operating within the narrative. However, if "commodity fetishism" is an appropriate description of the overvaluation of a car or a pair of sneakers in the film, it will hardly suffice as a description of the *emotional* meaning of Sal's pizzeria or Raheem's radio. Part of the pizzeria's importance to Sal is that it is a family business and also that it allows him a unique social presence within a minority community; Raheem's radio not only 'broadcasts' a political message but its sonic power suggests a direct communication from the psyche, specifically the id. Therefore, while recognizing the importance of the commodity aspect of *object* worship in the film, one must not ignore its *fetishistic* aspect. As detailed by Freud ("Fetishism", 1927) two characteristics of fetishism are particularly relevant to the film: 1) The association of the fetish with castration fears and 2) the possessor's personal over-investment of the fetish with *compensatory* value. (A third characteristic component, the association of fetishism with the *male* psyche is also relevant. Note that Mother-Sister also owns property, a brownstone, but *does not relate to it as fetish*. Significantly, once Lee establishes the fact of ownership in relation to the female character, he proceeds thereafter to ignore it. As in almost all Lee, the interpersonal dynamics in *DTRT* are primarily masculine).

With this in mind the film's realization of fetishism encompasses not only commodities but also (for example) the voice and the ability to insult (i.e. play 'the dozens') for Sweet Dick Willie (Robin Harris), his very name announcing a phallocentric nature. (In terms of the voice-as-phallus, compare also Rosie Perez's incarnation of Tina). There is also the law and what is made of it by its individual representatives. (Recall the fire hydrant scene). For Radio Raheem it is his stereo, his gratuitous displays of its sonic power making clear its psychic relevance. For Sal it's obviously his pizzeria, his overvaluation of it as object

visually symbolized at its introduction as a fortress, behind locks and a metal gate.

But behind the pizzeria are the film's most consistently powerful fetishes, money and capital. In terms of the realities of capitalism, this is entirely logical. The perceived power of all the film's other fetish objects, (stereo, car, pizzeria, the law) is eventually subverted by outside forces, all except money. (At the conclusion, Mookie reminds Sal that insurance money will compensate his financial, if not his emotional, loss). Thus, the only time prior to the riot that we see Sal *outside* the pizzeria (after Pino has abused Smiley/Roger Guenveur Smith) he is brandishing cash in an attempt to placate the members of the community.

There is a certain irony to the film's association of Sal and money for he nowhere expresses a desire for money *itself*. Its necessity is only expressed below the surface in the unconscious and unrecognized (either by Sal or the community) continuous cycle of empowerment (for Sal) and disempowerment (for the community) embodied in the exchange of cash for pizza that is the pizzeria's business. Both this quotidian social amnesia as well as the politics of castration that characterize business transactions are relevant to the film's first encounter between Radio Raheem and Sal where they volley for power, each respectively expressing his potency (like the incessant one-upmanship between campus rivals in Lee's *School Daze*). Raheem enters the parlor expressing power sonically, stereo blasting. Sal refuses him service unless the music is discontinued, an act that efficiently neutralizes Raheem's power. In an attempt at psychic compensation, Raheem rudely demands extra cheese on his pizza, which not only foregrounds the servile component of Sal's position but essentially attempts to rob Sal of 'capital'. However, Sal, as storeowner, holds the ultimate trump card: He returns with his habitual "Two dollars for extra cheese" a demand for more money that further robs Raheem of potency.

It is this aspect of the pizzeria that distinguishes it from all of the film's other fetishes: it is not only private property, it generates *capital*. As an embodiment of the capitalist ethos it grants Sal, more than any other character, the rights of full citizenship. As private property owner and vendor, Sal has the power to refuse service to potential customers as he threatens to do with both Buggin' Out and Radio Raheem. His position as employer also grants him limited control over the lives of his employees. The pizzeria functions as his personal fiefdom. ("What freedom? This is *my* pizzeria!") And although the film has been doubtless viewed by more *workers* than *owners*, social conditioning has made this a notoriously difficult proposition for audiences to challenge.

If repressed psychic energy characterizes relationships built upon exchange, repression is also characteristic of other social relations. Racism is a major concern within the narrative. Lee offers the viewer no explanation for racism, although he connects it to other concerns such as the inequities of capitalism. He makes it abundantly clear, however, that it is part of the American social landscape and *all* are prone to it, even oppressed minorities. Herein lies the significance of the scene in which characters of various ethnic backgrounds express their bigotry directly to the camera. It is (for the audience) a demonstration of the problem, but it is also, for the characters, on some level, a *release*. Significantly, *Sal* does not appear here. I would propose that Sal represses his racism under a cloak of liberal paternalism (an attitude that also blinds him to his sexual attraction to Jade). This attitude is made possible by the con-

trolled environment of the pizzeria. His repressed racism only surfaces when that control is threatened by outside forces, as with the eruption into the pizzeria of Buggin' Out and Radio Raheem at the film's climax.

With Mookie, repression derives from the employee/employer relationship and I will return at this time to the double motif. The generally negative aspects of his job inspire occasional protests from Mookie, protests that are either ignored or deflected back into work by Sal. This in turn results in the less direct and essentially ineffective protest of his extended, unscheduled work breaks (the midday shower, the visit to Tina's).

Lee, however, hints at a deep rage within Mookie, beyond what these minor protests would suggest. He does this by drawing on the conventions of a genre to which I earlier referred, whose chief concern *is* repression, one which characteristically utilizes doubles, alter egos and the figure of the *doppelgänger*: the gothic. It is through Mookie that Lee most systematically uses the alter ego to express repressed desire and more so through one character, the one who comes closest to the gothic's monster: Radio Raheem.

Mookie and Raheem are juxtaposed throughout. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that both continually traverse the neighborhood, Mookie on his deliveries, Raheem with no clear purpose, this last fact underlining his function as double. Raheem is like Frankenstein's monster in size, demeanor, physical strength, and inability to communicate verbally. He additionally utilizes the brute force of his stereo: As the monster cut a path through the village community, so too does Raheem with his stereo. But Raheem is ultimately only monster-like and Lee reveals his emotional vulnerability and humanness throughout. His gratuitous displays of sonic force are obviously boosts to a fragile ego. Lee emphasizes this point in Raheem's encounter with the Korean grocers, an encounter that, like his encounter with Sal, is the only time he is forced to rely upon *verbal* communication. With the potency of his stereo neutralized (the batteries have died) he desperately and cruelly reverts to verbal *abuse* to express his power just as later, with the destruction of the stereo, he will revert desperately to retaliatory physical violence.

Both the narrative's formal dualism as well as the doubling of Mookie and Raheem is underlined when Raheem and Mookie converse midway through the film. The scene occurs in the middle of the street, Raheem entering from the left, Mookie from the right, their paths almost forming a diagonal across the screen. At the scene's conclusion Mookie (who had just left the pizzeria on a delivery after a failed attempt to get paid before closing), will exit left of screen and Raheem, going in the opposite direction, will enter the pizzeria, radio blasting, symbolically expressing the rage Mookie suppresses. Raheem's monologue concerns his philosophy of life and is the equivalent to the advice Mookie receives from his other alter egos. The ideas expressed ("Love conquers hate"), besides recalling Robert Mitchum's monstrous psychopath in Laughton's *Night of the Hunter*, are just relevant to the film's social concerns (racism, capitalism, aggression, etc.) but are noteworthy for Raheem's *oversimplification* of the issues: The mystification of complex political issues to a Manichaeistic opposition of 'love' and 'hate' is entirely characteristic of a man who, through his use of force, relies very single-mindedly upon a simplified approach to achieving his goals. It also explains his inability to brook any challenge to his power, his view of the world providing him

with limited understanding and no alternate modes of behavior to achieve those goals. The force he represents can only be stopped by a *greater* force, one which comes, at the film's climax, in the form of the out-of-control cop who kills him, the cop who is also (as noted) *Sal's* double.

But Raheem is only the embodiment of repressed desire and we should expect to find symptoms of repressed rage in his 'creator', Mookie. Early signs of Mookie's growing frustration are his abruptness in an encounter with Da Mayor (when he advises Mookie to "do the right thing") and later when he loses his temper with Smiley (who ends up in tears). But the turning point occurs when Pino calls him a nigger. It is at this point (immediately after his discussion with Pino) that he asks to be paid his salary, *knowing* that it is Sal's custom to pay *at the day's close*. Thus Mookie's fetish is his salary ("I always get paid") and as events become more stressful his desire for compensation becomes more urgent. He is like the werewolf when the full moon rises or the vampire in his need for blood. Making these allusions more apt is the fact that the film's climax (ironically in a film where much is made of the effects of the day's heat) occurs well after the sun has set. The image of Mookie (just before the riot) at the pizzeria door blocking the eruption into the shop of Sal's volatile customers (whom Sal fatefully allows entrance) is also Mookie suppressing a rage that, because he has still not been paid, has not been appeased. That rage comes in the form of the union of Radio Raheem and Buggin' Out (i.e. brute strength and political action). However, with the death of the one and the arrest of the other, Mookie must for the first time take direct action. As if in a daze he makes the deliberate choice to vent his fury, with a cry of "hate" that underlines both the connection to Raheem and the element of *personal choice* inherent in the action. The minority, mostly black rioters appropriately come to represent the released forces, the sense of chaos perfectly suited to the expression of repressed rage, resulting in the destruction of the one object Mookie has most cause to hate, the pizzeria.

I will conclude with an examination of the political significance of the film's formal dualism. As noted I view this binary system as dialectical in nature, that is, it supports the narrative's move toward the synthesis of or balance between opposing political or moral positions. This refusal to take sides or privilege one political position over another is also characteristic of multi-character narratives (such as Lee's film) where a variety of ideological positions may be represented. If Lee cannot quite achieve the generosity or tolerance for human folly that Renoir achieves in *The Rules of the Game*, he comes close to achieving a balance between the opposing positions of employer and employee.

The ending repeats the final tableau of *School Daze* (Lee's preceding film) with the reconciliation of two male rivals but the differences are more significant than the similarities. Where that film ended with the reconciliation in the presence of the entire campus community, the community's presence underlining the significance of the reconciliation to every individual present, here the startling *absence* of all other characters underlines their symbolic function. It is as if the previous evening's release of repressed desires had made unnecessary the need for alter egos and Sal and Mookie are left alone to directly confront each other and finally resolve their conflict. The comedy of their respective refusals to claim the cash they had earlier hurled bitterly at one another points to their underlying mutual affection and affinity, feelings that the inequities of race and class in

America only served to complicate and they are given the chance for growth and change.

For Sal this growth is ironically linked to the destruction of the pizzeria, the one barrier that separated him from the minority community. The resolution of his relationship with Mookie has implications beyond the personal: Through his acceptance of a side of Mookie that he may never understand (or control) he accepts the autonomy of the racial 'other'. For Mookie there is no obvious sign of change: He is still demanding his pay as he had the day before. But whereas his previous demands were predicated by his need to compensate for his powerless position within the pizzeria his motivation is now more ambiguous. He is going to see his son, which can imply that his interests have developed beyond self-gratification.

Lee provides neither with easy salvation. For Sal the possibility remains, should the pizzeria reopen, of falling back into old patterns, the pizzeria re-established as a barrier between him and the community. For Mookie, the future seems even dimmer, the possibility for growth even more tenuous. His 'growth' associated as it is with the concept of family is qualified by Lee's pessimistic presentation of families throughout, all the families to which we are introduced (Mookie and Jade, Sal and sons, Tina and her mother) being characterized by unhappiness, conflict and the unsatisfactory *economic* dependence of one member upon another. This negative view extends to the family's latest incarnation: The charming picture of Mookie, Tina and son asleep is shattered, the moment they awaken, by bickering.

If the film's constant musical theme is *Fight the Power*, the ending confirms that it is only to *balance* that power, to find some sort of equity between opposing elements. The Sal/Mookie resolution supremely affirms this: Sal's financial loss (and corresponding growth in knowledge) is balanced by Mookie's newfound strength and maturity (and corresponding loss of regular income). A sense of equity is reflected in the tentatively achieved balance of other opposing elements in the film. Beginning with the music of the opening credits, (*Lift Every Voice and Sing* vs. *Fight the Power*) the theme is taken up in the film in the opposition of black and white races, man and woman (the long Mother-Sister/Da Mayor feud) and even fire and water (the riot). The film's final image is the photograph of Martin Luther King shaking hands with Malcolm X (passive resistance vs. self-defense), the film's poignant symbol of resolution and harmony. I don't think this balance is at all undermined by a view of the film as documenting a shift of power from one race to another. One might note such moments as the Mookie/Pino discussion of civilization where the bigoted Pino, backed by a picture of ancient ruins, can be seen as one culture's current and perhaps final product. The riot itself presents the minority neighborhood taking power and its final image, as the flames die, is of a photo of two black American icons being hung on a wall, replacing those of Italian American personalities. The symbolic function of money as potency plays its part here specifically in the image, during the destruction of the pizzeria, of hands grasping coins from the cash register, taken up later when Mookie snatches the excess cash from the ground. The final image of a triumphant Mookie strolling determinedly into an undetermined future is a fitting conclusion.

Notes

- 1 Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, "High and Low", *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*, Duke University Press, 2000, pp. 303-331.
- 2 W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Violence of Public Art: *Do the Right Thing*", *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago University Press, 1995.

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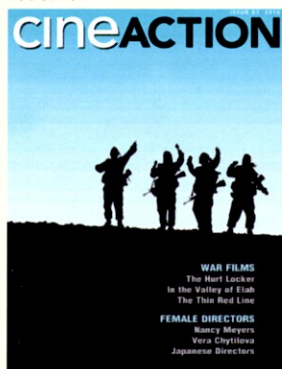
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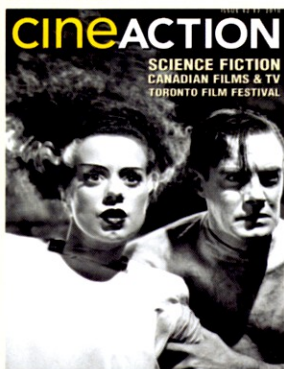
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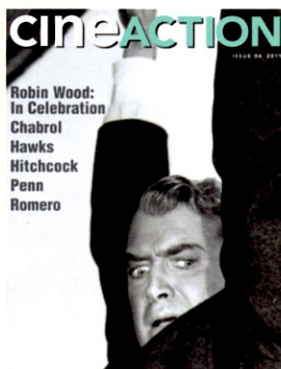
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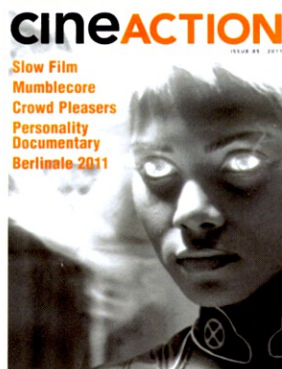
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ISSUE 84



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